

Holy Spirit, so that there is one activity. In this way the Christian is said to have become completely passive in the hands of God, ready to be taken by him wherever he wishes. He is able in this state of powerful passivity to support even death for the love of God.

It is therefore the life of the English martyrs that means so much to us today. We admire them in their dying. We are carried away with enthusiasm for the simple faith of St John Fisher, who could say in one short phrase before his execution that he died willingly for the truth of the Catholic faith. But not many of us are called upon to undergo that final test when only the power of the Holy Ghost could carry us through to victory. But that faith of which they are the 'witnesses' is not merely an assent to certain truths; it is a life spurred on to intense activity and overwhelming experience by prayer and penance, which themselves always deepen that union of wills in God which is called charity or love. And this life of faith and charity made fruitful by mortification and continual prayer is demanded of us all if we are to be worthy of those who today are suffering in the same way. There are contemplatives, ecclesiastics and men of the world languishing in prison, tortured to the very depths of their human characters, dying or being killed, and these things they suffer because they have devoted themselves to Christ. If these men are to be supported in their final testing and are to gain the crown, we fellow members of Christ must live in the same spirit of obedience unto death by prayer and penance. And if it so be that the turn might come to one of us, we might then presume to rely upon the Christian life that we had led in company with the host of Christ's members and to die as we had lived—in faith triumphant.



THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST THOMAS MORE

By

BERNARD FISHER

The King's good servant—but God's first.

—St Thomas More on the scaffold.

ST THOMAS MORE, 'the one genius of England', to quote Erasmus, is one of the best-loved of Englishmen. His wit and learning led Swift to number him among the seven

great men of the world.¹ His gentleness and charity led the Elizabethan London playwrights to name him 'the best friend the poor e'er had'.² Yet his very greatness and the warmth of his humanity have, in some respects, obscured the essential More. In the vast collection of Moreana available there is very little concerning Thomas More the saint, even less on More the theologian and little on Thomas the lawyer. By profession St Thomas was a lawyer, but it was as a theologian that he was admired and criticised by his contemporaries, and it was as the 'leader of the opposition' that he was liquidated by Henry. Above all, however, the man who died so nobly on 6th July, 1535, was a saint, a mystic and a martyr 'and martyrdom is perhaps the one thing that deserves the cant phrase of practical mysticism'.³ These facts were understood far better by his contemporaries than by latter writers, for our picture of More is too often that given us by the 'liberal historians' of the last century, who while admiring, were far from understanding the value and meaning of sanctity and for whom theology was a sterile science long since dead. Stapleton, the Douai theologian, who wrote the first published life of More 'for the glory of God, for the pity of England', marvels that 'a man whose life was filled with affairs of public life and the court, who was, too, well versed in general literature, should not only have dipped into scholastic theology but have been so thoroughly familiar with it'.⁴

Here we might also remark that St Thomas was a most ardent follower of Erasmus in his love of the Fathers. He had lectured on the *City of God* as a young man and his works were liberally scattered with quotations from the Fathers. As the official apologist appointed by the English hierarchy he used his knowledge with consummate skill and his adaptations of the Fathers and St Thomas Aquinas are likely to be missed by the average reader. The depth of his theological knowledge is shown best, perhaps, when he deals with the fundamental problem of salvation by faith alone. Here he anticipates the Council of Trent in a really remarkable manner. Realisation of More's capacity as a theologian is vital to

1 *Gulliver's Travels*.

2 *Sir Thomas More*. A Play by a group of Elizabethan playwrights of whom Shakespeare was one.

3 G. K. Chesterton. *Fame of Blessed Thomas More*, p. 64.

4 *Life of Thomas More*. Stapleton trans. Hallett, p. 38.

any appreciation of his importance as a saint and as a mystical writer. I hope this will become clear as we proceed.

Harfsfield's *Life of More* is a thesis proving that St John Fisher and St Thomas More are of one heart and mind with the great martyr-saints of England, St Thomas of Canterbury, St Alban and the rest. In the writings of Saunders and Cardinal Allen this thesis is assumed. Allen's works abound with references to our two great saints: 'such a couple as any other Christian nation would have bought with millions, but thought unworthy to live by the laws of ours'.⁵ 'It is the prisons that have yielded us so many Godly prayers, prophecies, letters both of old and latter years: divers of St Paul's divine epistles were edited by the spirit of confession in prison: there was the famous books of comfort written by Sir Thomas More . . .'⁶ wrote Allen, while the 1573 edition of *The Dialogue of Comfort* tells us that 'whereas many books have appeared and do daily come forth, that end towards some benefit or other unto me, yet scant any can appear, the profit whereof is so great and extendeth so far as of this'. I hope I am forgiven this long introduction but it should serve to remind us of the early tradition of More, the saint and theologian, while this understanding of St Thomas will give the clue to the continuity of thought among our martyrs whose works are discussed elsewhere. The last word must be with Blessed Edmund Campion who, writing *before* his conversion, could refer to Thomas as a man 'of incredible experience in affairs and penetration of intellect' . . . a man of 'sublime and almost divine wisdom'.⁷

That modern writers have lost this earlier tradition is understandable. As one reads More's works one is struck by the warmth and wit of his personality and it comes as something of a shock to realise what an essentially *silent* person he is. An example will best serve to show what I mean. In *The Dialogue of Comfort*, writing of ambition as being 'womanish' he is immediately reminded of a woman he once knew who 'for when her husband had no list to grow greatly upwards in the world; nor neither would labour for office of authority...she fell in hand with him and all to rated him, and asked him; "What will you do, that you list not to put forth yourself, as other folks do? Will you sit still by the fire and make goslings in the ashes as children do:

⁵ and ⁶ *Apology of Seminaries* 1581, p. 47.

⁷ Campion's *Opuscula*, p. 187.

Would God I were a man, and look what I would do!" "Why wife", quote her husband, "what would you do!" "What? By God! go forward with the best of them. For as my mother was wont to say (God have mercy on her soul), it is ever better to rule than to be ruled. And, therefore by God! I would not, I warrant you, be so foolish as to be ruled when I might rule". "By my troth wife", quoth her husband, "in this I dare say you say true. For I never found you willing to be ruled yet!"⁸ The wife is that lovable, commonsense housewife Dame Alice More. The incident must have occurred shortly after More's resignation from the office of Lord Chancellor and he is sitting and thinking, 'doodling' in the ashes with a stick. He does not here tell us however, *what* he was thinking. Roper, his son-in-law, records how in the Tower, wishing to console his broken-hearted Meg, he confessed that he had spent many long and sleepless nights at Chelsea worrying about his fate and the sufferings that would fall upon his family when the inevitable summons to Westminster arrived. Now, however, there is no need to worry, he says, for the battle is won. 'For me thinketh God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on his lappe and dandlethe me.'⁹ To console Meg, he made this confession and the remark quoted above which, for all its simplicity, bears the stamp of true mysticism. To Meg, alone, did he confide his secret thoughts and then only to console her. To this same desire we owe the preservation of his wonderful prayers. For the most part these are but headings for meditation written so that he and Meg, separated from each other by the grim walls of the Tower, might yet pray together. Of his long hours of prayer in his chapel at Chelsea we know nothing; this tiny collection is the sole relic of his prayers.

Give me thy grace good Lord
 To set the world at nought,
 To set my mind fast upon thee,
 And not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths
 To be content to be solitary
 Not to long for worldly company.

Here, in More's beautiful English, we have his own prayer *that*

⁸ Harpsfield's *Life of More*, p. 95 and *Dialogue of Comfort in English Works* 1557, p. 1,224.

⁹ Roper's *Life* and Harpsfield, p. 171.

his inner silence might be increased so that he may have time and opportunity:

Gladly to be thinking of God.

Piteously to call for his help.

To lean unto the comfort of God.

Busily to labour to love him.¹⁰

'Busily to labour to love him'; could one find a finer definition of the perfect christian life?

This silence of More is no accident; it is a studied thing. For four years as a young man he had lived with the Carthusians, joining them in their prayers and devotions. He decided that God had not called him to be a monk but these four years are the critical years in the formation of *Saint Thomas More*. These Carthusians remained his special friends and watching from his window in the Tower as they were drawn away to execution he could remark: 'Loe, doest thou not see, Meg, that these blessed fathers be now cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage?'¹¹ How deeply he understood them! We can recall how he had said to Meg: 'I assure you, on my faith, that had it not been for my wife and you my children... I would long ere this have closed myself in as straight a room than this (his cell in the Tower) and straighter too.'¹² One can hardly be surprised, therefore, that this same sympathy with the Carthusian ideal is evident throughout the enigmatic second book of *Utopia*.

The Carthusian life is a hidden life, lived by men content to be alone with God, 'content to be solitary', a life of silence. Thomas was not called upon to guide the souls of others, nor called upon, under obedience, to write of his experience with God... his vocation was to live the hidden life of the monk in the world... to combine the most successful public career and perfect family life with an inner awareness of God such as we associate with the great mystics. It is the hidden Carthusian life transplanted into the world. The hair shirt is always there, but hidden, to be smuggled away at the very end when the battle was won.

More's silence is not confined to matters of the spirit but is evident in every aspect of his life. It shows itself in his extreme

¹⁰ English Works, p. 1,416.

¹¹ Roper and Harpsfield, p. 179.

¹² Roper and Harpsfield, p. 171.

reverence for the conscience of everyman. How often, during his imprisonment did he write to Henry, Cromwell and Meg that 'he would meddle with no man's conscience', and that he asked only to be left in peace with his own? Nowhere is it more apparent than during his trial.

His devotion to the Passion of our Lord is apparent. In the Tower he wrote his *History of the Passion*, part in English part in Latin. Equally apparent is his constant meditation on the four last things, a subject on which he had written a short work when a young man. Now all this is Carthusian, but it is also rooted in the tradition of the English mystics to whom Professor Chambers bids us turn to discover the roots of More's prose style.¹³

In this connection, St Thomas has a special significance. This fifteenth-century devotion to our Lord, wonderful as it was, was sometimes dangerous. Religion and devotion might become a too personal affair; too much of a silent communing of the soul with God. The dangers of the *devotio moderna* and the part it played in preparing the ground for the Reformation is at last beginning to be realised. Thomas's devotion is controlled as one would expect in a theologian. His prayers begin 'Give me thy grace good Lord' and end 'The things, good Lord that I pray for, give me thy grace to labour for'. In the devotional sphere, Luther is answered as clearly as he had been answered by More on the strictly theological arguments on predestination.

Again, it was the whole conception of the Church which was attacked by Luther. In England, too, the Supremacy was no schism but a heresy, for no longer was there to be an infallible Church through which Christ's teachings and his redeeming graces were to reach our souls. Beyond the sphere of faith, St Thomas saw the division of Christendom which must result from Luther's revolt. With the Turks at the gates of Europe she could ill-afford a schism. It is not mere coincidence that the *Dialogue of Comfort* should be a conversation between two Hungarians daily awaiting the Turkish attack! Luther had broken Europe's bond of unity. It is not surprising, therefore, to find More, in the Tower, writing his short thesis on the Blessed Eucharist, the 'bond of unity'. 'Make us all, good Lord, virtually participant of that Holy Sacrament this day, and every day make us all lively

13 *Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School*. R. W. Chambers.

members, sweet Saviour Christ, of thy holy mystical body, thy Catholic Church'¹⁴ is a cry of his heart.

Nowhere do all these elements of the essential More show themselves more clearly than in his speech after condemnation. During the long months of imprisonment he had not denied by word or writing the doctrine of the Supremacy; he had merely refused to swear acceptance; he had been *silent*. When, on perjured evidence, he had been found guilty he spoke: 'Since I am condemned, and God knows how; I wish to speak freely of your statute, for the discharge of my conscience. For the seven years that I have studied the matter I have not read in any approved doctor of the Church that a temporal lord could or ought to be head of the spirituality... For one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have the General Councils of 1,000 years; and for one kingdom I have France and all the kingdoms of Christendom... I say further that your statute was ill-made because you have sworn never to do anything against the Church, which through all Christendom is one and undivided, and that you have no authority without the consent of all Christians to make a law or Act of Parliament or Council against the union of Christendom. I know, well, that the reason you have condemned me is because I have never been willing to consent to the King's second marriage; but I hope in the divine goodness and mercy that as St Paul and St Stephen whom he persecuted are now friends in paradise, so we, though differing in this world, shall be united in perpetual charity in the other. I pray God protect the King and give him good counsel.'¹⁵

Here is an appeal to theological faith; to the Fathers; to the law of nature; to the constitution; to the coronation oath and an appeal for European unity. Here is the calm wit, the masterful command of English and a charity and loyalty deeper than death. At that great moment he possessed to the full that for which he always prayed: 'Give me, good Lord, *a full faith, a firm hope and a fervent charity*, a love to thee, good Lord, incomparable above the love to myself; and that I love nothing to thy displeasure, but everything in an order to thee.'

¹⁴ English Works, p. 1,416.

¹⁵ State Papers of Henry VIII.