On St Thomas More

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His interest in St Thomas More stems from being in More's house while at secondary school, and providentially now teaches at St Thomas More Secondary School. As an Altar Server and Master of Ceremonies with 20 years' experience, he is also aware of More's secondary patronage of the Guild of St Stephen, the Archconfraternity for Altar Servers; Thomas More himself being an Altar Server in the Chelsea Old Church, on the banks of the River Thames. His Undergraduate Thesis specialised on the Decree on the means of social communication, Inter Mirifica, of the Second Vatican Council and he was present at the Papal Mass of Beatification of John Henry Cardinal Newman, during the Official State Visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the UK in 2010.

The 1966 film directed by Fred Zinnerman, depicting the life of Saint Sir Thomas More describes the statesman and saint as "A Man for All Seasons" in the title of the film. A man for all seasons indeed, as an erudite scholar: a writer, lawyer and theologian, a politician, a father, a husband and devoted Catholic. A skilled statesman as close advisor to King Henry VIII, holding offices of Speaker of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer: *"Few men were so qualified by ability and acumen, education, knowledge of languages, diplomatic finesse, tact, charm, genius for friendship"* (Rowse, 1979). Jonathan Swift, author of Gulliver's Travels considered as *"the person of the greatest virtue that this kingdom hath ever produced"* (Rowse, 1979). Fellow scholar and theologian Erasmus' assessment of More was *"a genius such as England never had before, nor ever will have again"* (Trenchard, J. and Gaffney, C., 1979). *"In truth, all the evidence shows that he was an exceedingly good man"* (Rowse, 1979).

Described by his son-in-law William Roper in his biography of More, written not long after More's execution in 1535, as *"A Man of Singular Virtue"* (Roper, 1556). More's virtue is extolled his sacrifice made, during the period of the reformation, shown by his final words *"I die the King's good servant, but God's first"*. It was More's own conscience and his "huge integrity" suggests Bishop of Portsmouth, Bishop O'Toole (Caldwell, (Catholic Herald), 2017), that led St. Thomas More to martyrdom, attesting to the truth of the Catholic faith, in the authority of the Pope as stated in Matthew's Gospel "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church"* (Mt 16:18, NRSV).

More's intellect, reason, faith, devotion and conviction is recorded in the conversation he had with Sir Richard Rich, King Henry VIII's new advisor who was sent to trap More for not taking the Oath of Supremacy of the Monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

"Parliament may well meddle with the state of temporal princes. But suppose the Parliament makes a law that God could not be God, Would you then, Master Rich say that God were not God?" asked More. "No sir, that would I not since no Parliament may make any such law" Rich is quoted to reply. Then, suggests More: "No more could Parliament make the King Supreme Head of the Church."

(Rowse, 1979).

It is well noted that Thomas More participated in monastic devotions as a lay person, including acts of austere and strict penance. Roper's biography of More says that his daily custom at home including private prayers, was to recite psalms, litanies and collects with his wife, children and household in the family chapel (Roper, 1556). As an act of penance, to unite the wearer with Christ's passion and suffering he always wore "a sharp shirt of hair next to his skin, which he never left off wholly" (Rowse, 1979).

This devotion of wearing a hairshirt made of horse or goat hair stems from More's four-year vocational discernment in his early 20s at a Carthusian monastery, devoted to "vigils, fasts, prayers and similar austerities" (Rowse, 1979). Wearing the hairshirt continued into his later life in his fatherly vocation and political career, continuing to wear it underneath his robes and chain of high office; when bloodstained, from self-scourging he would give it to Margaret Giggs his adopted daughter to wash (Rowse, 1979).

The day before his execution, the shirt was given to Margaret, and it remained in her family until 1626, when it was bequeathed to a community of exiled English Augustinian nuns in Louvain, Belgium. After their priory in Devon closed in 1983, the larger relic of St Thomas More's hairshirt was kept at Buckfast Abbey, in the Diocese of Plymouth (Caldwell, (Catholic Herald), 2017). The Catholic Herald reported at the opening of the shrine at Buckfast Abbey in 2017 when it was encased, Abbot Charlesworth said:

"What this relic represents is St Thomas More's faith. This relic says something about who Thomas More was as a Christian … it is a major relic. It is linked to his life of conversion and his identification with the sufferings of Christ" Abbot Charlesworth (Caldwell (Catholic Herald), 2017).

Thomas More's penitential mind-set can be seen in the prayers he wrote whilst a prisoner in the Tower of London:

"To know mine own vility and wretchedness, to humble and meeken myself under the mighty hand of God; to bewail my sins past, for the purging of them patiently to suffer adversity; gladly to bear my purgatory here, to be joyful of tribulations; to walk the narrow way that leads to life, to bear the cross with Christ".

St. Thomas More

More was executed at the Tower of London on the 6th July 1535. Today, remains of More are buried at the Tower inscribed on his tombstone "Knight, scholar, writer, statesman, Lord Chancellor of England 1529-32". More's faithfulness led to sainthood by Pope Pius XI in 1955, and declared patron of lawyers, conscience and adopted children and later, of politicians and statesmen, a title given by St. Pope John Paul II.

The sermon of Fr. Lawrence Lew O.P. calls on the witness of St. Thomas More, and his friend and Bishop, St. John Fisher (who was also imprisoned and executed at the Tower) , as examples for our own faith, to attest to the truth of the Gospels:

"As such, these great English Martyrs interrogate us: Does the Gospel Truth matter to us? Are we willing to die for the Truth? Do we even know the Truth that Christ's Church proclaims?
It is Jesus Christ who saves us and gives us true joy and peace. Therefore, as we honour Saints John Fisher and Thomas More today, let us ask them to pray for England and the Church in this land.
And let us honour them by desiring to know, to uphold, and defend the Truth that comes from Christ. For as the Lord said: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6)."
Fr. Lawrence Lew O.P. (2017)

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