Why was St Thomas More Executed?

(Digest of a lecture given by the author at St Alphege Church, Bath, on 27 January 2023)

Thomas More was executed on 6 July 1535 because he was not prepared to give up his belief in the primacy of the pope as visible head of the Church on earth. More's conscience, informed by the teaching of the Catholic Church which he believed expressed God's law, led him to believe that papal primacy underpinned and fostered universal communion.

Part of the answer to why More was executed is that Henry VIII relentlessly pursued him to the scaffold. Having promoted More step by step to the chancellorship in 1529, having admired More's defence of the Church against heresies, and having befriended him, Henry became increasingly disappointed and then angry with More for his refusal to be drawn into the marriage question.

When on 15 May 1532 the clergy capitulated to the King in regard to the succession, More resigned the chancellorship the next day pleading ill health (not untrue, as he had been severely over-working and suffered from angina, but the timing was significant).

Henry had More imprisoned on 17 April 1534 for refusing to swear the oath to the Act of Succession, because in the preamble to the oath there was a rejection of papal authority. More took refuge in silence but Henry construed that as being tantamount to opposition. Henry hoped that imprisonment would wear More down, and used every method short of physical torture to get More to come into line. An Act of Attainder was passed against More which condemned him to life imprisonment and to the forfeiture of his goods, with cruel consequences for his family.

Given More's standing in the country and across Europe, his submission mattered enormously to Henry. Furthermore, Henry's character was a mixture of dependence on others, volatility, and an almost desperate need for support and agreement. When he thought those close to him had failed him or blocked him then he was ruthless in either demanding their total compliance or

elimination. For Henry the lives of others were cheap, regardless of age or high moral reputation.

In November 1534 the Act of Supremacy declared Henry 'the only supreme head on earth of the Church in England'. Then came the Treasons Act, making it treason, punishable by death, to disavow the Act. Thereby Henry extended treason to cover what people *believed* about the way the Church should be.

More was put on trial in Westminster Hall on 1 July 1535. Legally he won. He was defeated only by a show trial, pre-determined by the judges, and by the perjury of the main government witness, Sir Richard Rich, the Solicitor-General.

Thomas More was executed partly because he had developed thorough principles, precious to him, about the nature of the Church. After the expected guilty verdict, he at last discharged his conscience, delivering a forceful and well-reasoned repudiation of the notion that the Church could be under the monarch and not the pope. The relationship between the authority of the pope, the bishops and the rest of the Church was, in More's view, an entirely reasonable subject for discussion. But he was absolutely certain that the *monarch* could not be head of the Church, as he saw no basis for this in Scripture or in the tradition of the Church.

Furthermore, the royal supremacy of the Church in England cut off the English Church from the universal Church and this separation wounded the body of Christ. The parliament of one country, he continued, could not 'make a particular law disagreeable with the general law of Christ's Universal Catholic Church.' He contrasted the universal Church, what he called 'the common corps of Christendom', with what he saw as the narrow, national view of England's king and parliament. The English bishops, with the great exception of Fisher, had submitted to the King and Parliament. More, therefore, looked to bishops in other parts of Christendom and bishops across the centuries.

More was a martyr to the Catholicism of the Church, its universality, which crucially included communion with the Bishop of Rome. In the 1530s it required great discernment and great courage to die for *this* principle. It showed a rare ability to distinguish the office of the papacy from its incumbents. All ten of the popes in More's life-time were unimpressive in almost all respects. They lacked the personal qualities and the moral authority to square up to the greatest crisis

to hit the Church since the Great Schism of the eleventh century and the Arian heresy of the fourth century.

More fervently wanted to see reform of the Church from within not through splits. He would never have gone the way of Luther. Nor did he support those who argued that supreme authority in the Church should lie in a General Council, which could oversee the papacy. For him Christ had given Peter and his successors a special role and this remained, however resentful secular powers in Europe might be in regard to papal powers in legal and financial areas or however much Henry sought to give theoretical justification for his royal supremacy.

More saw the Church as a body with hierarchy, structure, discipline and jurisdiction, but he also saw it more deeply and at its best as a mystical and sacramental body, with Christ at its centre, fed by the sacraments, and guided and infused by the Holy Spirit since its foundation. The Church was not only the pope and clergy but the whole multitude of the faithful through the ages. Papal primacy was a crucial part of the mixture, especially because Henry VIII made it so, but it was only an integral part of the whole Church, and it was for the whole Church and its unity that More died.

Religious disunity, More also feared, would lead to social breakdown. History surely bears him out, as seen in the terrible sectarian conflicts in northern Europe over the next hundred years and more.

It is one thing, however, to have principles, but something much more to go to one's death over them, especially as More dreaded, until told otherwise at the last minute, that he would be hanged, drawn and quartered. Why did he not waver? We can never fully know. However, his prison writings, the so-called *Tower Works*, point us towards answers.

He was motivated by conscience, by the determination to uphold convictions he believed to be grounded in God-given truth. He was motivated by a longing for heaven and a dread of hell. He was motivated by St Paul's perspective, that this life is of little worth, rubbish even, compared to the life of heaven. He drew strength too from the solidarity he felt with his soul-mates, John Fisher, the Carthusians, Richard Reynolds. He also wanted to give an example as a public figure, standing firm on principles that were of life-and-death importance.

But, above all, he endured because of his relationship with his Saviour and his efforts to imitate Him. In *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* he examined various temptations: giving up in the face of adversity (through despair, pusillanimity, scrupulosity or even suicide); pride, carrying on for the wrong reason; sinking one's heart into the things of this world, losing sight of the eternal goal; surrendering to the fear of losing all possessions and status (discussed in eleven chapters) or the fear of unbearable pain (nine chapters). He weighed these against the eternal loss of hell and the limitless joys of heaven.

He considered how fear might be overcome by reason, by anticipating the possible torments. But reason was not enough. Only strengthened by supernatural grace could one subject fear to the will, underpinned by complete trust in God. Fear can fall away only as the ardour of love increases towards immersion in the all-consuming love of God.

In his *Treatise on the Passion* and in *De Tristitia Christi* More expressed his meditations on the Passion. His belief in the profound interconnection of the Passion and the Eucharist was brilliantly set out in *A Treatise on the Blessed Body*: the unity of the faithful through the Eucharistic Sacrifice; the absolute need for proper preparation for the Sacrament and then the imperative, with God's grace, of acting out the consequences of the sacrament in one's life. Specifically, he could not receive Holy Communion and then sign the Act of Supremacy. In his *Devout Instructions, Meditations and Prayers* he explored the theme of forgiving one's enemies.

In his last work (*De Tristitia Christi*), he imagined Christ saying to all, like himself, who are called to martyrdom and are afraid:

> O faint of heart, take courage and do not despair. You are afraid, you are sad, you are stricken with weariness and dread of the torment with which you have been cruelly threatened. Trust me . . . See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road. Take hold of the border of my garment.

Giles Mercer

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