

**St. Thomas More**

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*Interfecistis, interfecistis hominem omnium Anglorum optimum.*—Cardinal Pole.

When His Holiness Pope Pius XI declared himself as favourable to the canonization of Blessed Thomas More a worthier choice could not have been made. This special act of glorification of the Catholic Church not only pays the highest spiritual tribute to a man who died a martyr for truth, but also serves to exemplify in no small manner the true spirit of understanding and affection that has in recent years been manifested between the English people and The Holy Roman See. The canonization of an Englishman is indeed a rarity, for never since England disclaimed Papal authority has such a posthumous honor been conferred upon one of her subjects.

The life of Thomas More is so strange, so interesting, and so vastly dissimilar to most other saints, any attempt in the line of detailed biography would be, in our limited compass, ineffectual to the reader. A brief summary of the troublesome political and religious events of his time in which he was a central figure, and the exalted Christian spirit and high-minded fidelity with which he encountered these circumstances is enough to show why modern investigations have found in his character the essential elements of sainthood.

When we consider the lives of saints the similarity of their earthly vocations becomes obvious. Many have been the faithful members of religious orders, and often in the confines of some lonely monastery cell they lived an ascetic life, fasted and prayed and thus served their God. Their sacred memory reveals to us an almost supernatural sanctity, a devotion to God so intense that we cannot readily comprehend its nature. In view of this we are perhaps prone to regard their very existence as being unnatural and therefore impossible for ordinary men to imitate. The life of Thomas More, however, prompts us to dispel such notions. Here is no "fugitive and cloistered virtue." His monastery was the great world of public affairs, and there he fought in the struggles of his generation for the sake of righteousness and above all for the glory of God.



The Golden Age of Classicism, pregnant with its lofty sentiments of toleration and social reform was just dawning upon a mediaeval England when Thomas More began his public career. Humane in temperament, and naturally inclined to the study of the classics, he was greatly influenced by this revival of culture, so much in fact that he became one of its ardent exponents. His writings, his administration of justice in the Law Courts, and his far-sighted social ideals all disclose an exalted mind imbued with the spirit of the New Learning. He perceived, however, lurking in its paganistic standards, the sinister shadows of religious revolt, and struggling in the vortex of self-expansion and self-repression he found solace and strength in the doctrines of his beloved Catholic faith. His mind was modern, his soul mediaeval.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Classical Revival diverted the minds of men from the paths of holiness and even paved the way for the Protestant Reformation. We cannot, however, justly attribute it to the cause of the Great Religious Movement in England. A very trivial thing—a domestic schism in which was involved the “eternal triangle” resulted in a rent Christendom with its accompanying religious wars and bigotry. It was, perhaps, the most tragic occurrence of all Church history.

But even in such tragedy dwells nobleness and sacrifice. There remains extant the inspiring and beautiful memory of a man who had the courage to attempt to frustrate the designs of an unscrupulous and passionate Tudor. Chancellor as he was and intimate friend of the king, Sir Thomas came to the aid of that much wronged woman, Catherine of Aragon, publicly denounced the divorce action of Henry the Eight and calmly refused to recognize him as the head of the new English Church. Thus was automatically signed his death warrant. He mounted an English scaffold and died by English hands a martyr to justice and truth. He served his king and his country but only within the limits of righteousness. Who could exemplify better than he, the words of a poet who long ago said—

*“I am too high-born to be propertied,  
To be a secondary at control,  
Or useful serving-man and instrument  
To any sovereign state throughout the world.”*



It has been truly said that even if Thomas More had not suffered martyrdom, the holy nature of his private life would have merited for him a place in the category of saints. There was something infinitely grand and inspiring in the atmosphere of his home life. In an age so infamously associated with political tumult, pseudo-religious doctrines and moral decadence, his patriarchal household at Chelsea was, as Erasmus termed it—"a veritable school of Christian religion." In his nature was born a deep parental responsibility, an instinct that impelled him to have under his loving guardianship not only his own family but his numerous relatives as well. Such a mode of family life would, nowadays, be regarded as an impossible, or at least a very improbable existence; but under the affectionate and pious master, perfect harmony, cheerfulness, and true Catholic devotion prevailed in the More household. To every Christian family his example of home life should be an abiding inspiration. Here was found the true element of Christian society—a home patterned after the precepts and example of a Family that dwelt at Nazareth fifteen hundred years before.

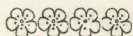
What an ideal setting for a beautiful friendship! Thomas More found in the spirit of one man the satisfaction his own humanistic nature craved for. That man was Erasmus, the cultured and eccentric sage of the New Learning. True, there was a deep religious contrast in the natures of these two men; but let it be said of Erasmus that although he lived a tumultuous life, flippantly assailed churchmen and "idly swung on the gate between England and Rome," he never pointed the finger of antagonism at Catholic orthodoxy. But if to modern minds his virtues are conjectural, it cannot be denied that he represented the highest form of intellectual greatness and freedom of mind. Thomas More sensed his brilliant potentialities and found his company most congenial. Perhaps we can picture the quaint pair ambling in the pleasant Chelsea garden matching scholarship and wit; each admiring the eccentricities of the other.

In the annals of English Literature the name of Thomas More will be a lasting memorial. Although there is lacking in his Latin prose the rhythmic and graceful style of Erasmus, he contributed to World Literature a work that will never grow old. This is his famous "Utopia." In it the deep humanist, the friend of Erasmus, the modern



philosopher breaks the fetters of superstitious convention and imparts to an indifferent world the broadest and most humane views of human life. It is not a little amazing to find in the "Utopia," written over four hundred years ago, the modern treatment of surprisingly modern subjects—finance, secret diplomacy, religious toleration, treatment of criminals and hosts of other present day problems. Of the book a critic says—"It is an indictment of the state of society in which More found himself and an aspiration after a fairer and juster ordering of the commonwealth." Such acumen and prophetic genius places Thomas More in the first rank of modern thinkers.

Today we pay tribute to England's Saint, a man who four hundred years ago died a martyr's glorious death rather than yield obedience to a law he believed contrary to the Law of God. Four centuries have now passed away, carrying in its bosom the memories of great men, their achievements and failures; memories of the rise of governments and the fall of cities and nations; all these will soon be forgotten, but the name of Saint Thomas More will defy the pervious sands of passing ages, for in sainthood there is immortality.



Blind and naked Ignorance  
Delivers brawling judgments, unashamed,  
On all things all day long.

—Tennyson.

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Better trust all, and be deceived,  
And weep that trust and that deceiving,  
Than doubt one heart, that if believed  
Had blessed one's life with true believing.

—Kemble.

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Men are most apt to believe what they least understand.—*Montaigne.*