Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

A Saint for All Seasons

Following is the first of a two-part series on the life of St. Thomas More, the fifth centenary of whose birth is being observed this year.

During this past year there have been numerous conferences, meetings and lectures to celebrate the five-hundreth anniversary of the birth of St. Thomas More in 1478. In his native city of London, The National Portrait Gallery put on a special exhibit of paintings related to More and his family. In our country, Yale University is publishing the first modern edition of his writings. Two weeks ago scholars from around the world gathered in Washington for four days to discuss the significance of More's life and work. Tomorrow, July 6, the Church will celebrate his feast day, the date of his martyrdom in 1535. Well might we ask ourselves, "What makes Thomas More so attractive in today's world which does not usually pay much heed to saints and scholars?"

Some of the story of More's life is familiar to many, thanks to Robert Bolt's recent play and the film, A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS. However, there is a part of the story which the playwright touches only in passing as he concentrates on the public, political working out of the final drama. Indeed More lived in the world and was a "man of the world" — urbane, self-assured, distinguished, perfectly mannered, intelligent about men and affairs. He was an eloquent speaker at ease in Latin, Greek and English, an accomplished diplomat and courtier, skilled in the law both as lawyer and as a judge. More possessed abundantly every quality which the classical writers summed up in the word HUMANITAS, that quality which blended into one everything their learning, culture and wisdom could produce to make a man fully human, fully humane.

St. Thomas More (left) with St. John Fisher.

This deep seriousness, moreover, was coupled with a warmth, a sense of humor, a gaiety, which made him a legend even in his own time. More's friendliness and wit attracted others to him and his home became one of the places every important person wanted to visit when in London. A devoted husband and father, More loved his family and often lamented the amount of time his duties at court kept him away from home. When absent he would snatch moments from official business in order to write letters to his wife and children. He encouraged them in their studies, suggested topics for them to investigate, urged them to grow in virtue, as well as learning, and often told them how much he missed them and wanted to hear about everything they were doing. He sent them little presents and made the children ask for money because their letters gave him such great pleasure. They in turn would knowingly make mistakes in their letters in order to attract his attention and assure a reply with its gentle, witty correction. What child would mind being whipped by its father when he knew it was to be done with "peacock feathers?"

In addition to his family More loved the poor and gave liberally to provide food, shelter and medicine for them. Despite concerted government propaganda to blacken his name when he fell from favor, his reputation lived on in Elizabethan England as "the best friend that the poor e'er had." As a lawyer and judge his integrity was such that not a single instance could be found of corruption or injustice when his enemies searched the record looking for some cause to pull him down and destroy him. This is, of course, no more than a glimpse at the multi-faceted character of the person whom Erasmus describes as OMNIUM HORARIUM HOMO, "a man for all seasons," and G. K. Chesterton as "the greatest man that England ever saw."

We must ask, however, what does this have to do with the Gospels, with the following of Christ, that demands more than noble HUMANITAS, creative genius, personality, devotion to one's family, friends and profession? Indeed, what does this have to do with us, here and now? As interesting as it is, the life of More is past and over. The problems and temptations which he faced and overcame in his day are not our problems today. None of us can relive his life in its particular circumstances. In what manner, then, is More's sanctity related to our santification? I would like to suggest that there is a theme which runs throughout his life giving it a harmony and unity. And it is an action we can easily bring to our lives. More centered his life around his parish church and cultivated a strong, enduring devotion to its patron saint.

The Church Prays!

Following is the text of the address given by Pope Paul at the general audience on June 14.

We are still taken up by that simple but fundamental question which involves our practical judgment though the latter is rooted in deep speculative questions. It is from this judgment that the modern outlook draws its decisive orientation with regard to religion, which very often still signifies the Church in our everyday world. Well, this question presses on almost angrily as follows: what does the Church do? In the agitated spirit of those who raise the question, it means in actual fact: what is the use of the Church? And the question becomes hard and radical, at once materialistic. There is no longer room for religion in the modern outlook, which is completely absorbed by tangible and scientific reality and always geared to the usefulness of what occupies man's attention and activity. It is an attitude that is repeated.

The Church, at first intimidated by the churlishness and intrusiveness of the question, sometimes seems to hesitate whether to answer. But then, strengthened by her own conscience and her own faith, she answers simply once more: the Church prays! And at once there rises a double question, to which we believers should be able to give some convincing reply: what does praying mean? And what is the use of praying? They are elementary questions; but how aggressive, how dangerous today! But we must not fear, even if now we cannot and do not wish to give adequate answers on the rational plane to the formidable objections which these questions raise in the human mind.

'Prayer reveals to us a spiritual, vast, splendid, mysterious world . . .'

In the meantime we could elude the negative character of these questions by observing that they do not strike any target that is dangerous for the normal development of civil activity. The man who prays does not harm anyone, nor does he check or hinder man's mental or physical work. On the contrary, we could recall what fruitfulness human activity has taken on and enjoyed from a formula, still operative within and alongside the church which has united and almost interpenetrated the two characteristic and supreme moments of human activity: to pray and to work: "ora et labora."

This is a formula which St. Benedict taught his disciples, among whom we, too, and also the whole Church, can take our place.

For the Church seeks and finds its fundamental reason for existence in its relationship with God. And the expression of this relationship constitutes that encyclopedia of the human spirit, which we call prayer. We find it in the silence of the soul, in that interior silence in which God's word makes itself heard in the first place and is formulated in fundamental questions. The latter cast doubt on the commonplaces of our superficial mentality and bring forth a self criticism which we can call the awakening of conscience. At the same time they instil a new dominant certainty on the existence, the presence and the action of God in our spirit.

It is, as it were, a solar dawn which diffuses an interior light. From it, things, and our life in the first place, take on a new meaning, a philosophy, a wisdom which imposes itself and justifies itself, at once fearful and friendly, to which the human spirit feels it owes the name of truth.

It is in short, an experience by which our silent lips are opened and find on themselves the classical definitions of prayer: a rising up towards God, almost a bold leap, straightaway penetrated with humility, which implores and invokes help.

Prayer reveals to us a spiritual, vast, splendid, mysterious world, like the sky which is above our heads and describes the immense sky of Reality, in which we live, too often blind, short-sighted and insensitive.

Here we are helped by Christ's word, which exhorts us, as if to reassure us that we are not dreaming: we "ought always to pray and not lose heart."

After teaching us the prayer which cancels the infinite distance between the two disproportionate and incomparable terms — the infinite God, and the microbe man — it goes, as fortunately for us we know: "Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven . . ."

What a panorama opens up around us! What realism our prayer takes on! What trembling trust our language acquires!

Yes, what does the Church do? Let us never forget! The Church, and we are the Church, prays; and she prays like this!