

Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

A Saint for All Seasons

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



More's home in London from the time of his marriage in 1505 until he moved to Chelsea in 1524 was located in the parish of St. Stephen, Walbrook. For nearly twenty years, he would have listened to sermons about the patron saint of the parish. He also, we know, attended the recitation of the Office on Sundays and feast days. The Epistle for the Mass of St. Stephen recounts from the Acts of the Apostles the martyrdom of this first Christian to lay

down his life as witness to Christ and His teaching. In those days Stephen, full of grace and fortitude, did great wonders and signs among the people. Now there arose some, of that which is called the synagogue of the Libertines and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of them that were of Cilicia and Asia, disputing with Stephen: and they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit that spoke. Now, hearing these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen being full of the Holy Spirit, looking up steadfastly to heaven, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And he said: behold I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God. And they crying out with a loud voice stopped their ears, and with one accord ran violently upon him. And casting him forth without the city, they stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, invoking and saying: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling on his knees he cried with a loud voice, saying: Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he said this, he fell asleep in the Lord. And Saul was consenting to his death.

The intention of the lesson is to present the Christian with a model for his own conduct when faced with trouble and persecution. Thomas More was deeply impressed by the disposition of St. Stephen toward his enemies as they stoned him to death because of the Faith he proclaimed. It is to this event in St. Stephen's life that More returns time and again in his own writings. In THE DIALOGUE CONCERNING HERESIES, More cites Stephen's charity



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

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toward his persecutors as an example of the great love the saints show for us who are still on earth, not yet joined with them in heaven. The obligation of the Christian to love his enemies echoes throughout A DIALOGUE OF COMFORT AGAINST TRIBULATION, composed while More was imprisoned in the Tower of London. To the objection that to die for the faith under such conditions was shameful in the eyes of men, More answers, "For here may we see and be sure, that not at the death of St. Stephen only, to whom it liked Him to show himself with heaven open over his head, but at the death also of every man that so dieth for the faith: God, with his heavenly company, beholds his whole passion, and looks on." St. Stephen is not only the protomartyr, but also the prototype of "every man that so dies for the faith."

On July 1, 1535 More was tried in Westminster Hall, judged guilty of treason on the evidence of a

perjured witness, and condemned to die. Following the pronouncement of the verdict, More made a short statement to the court in which he disclosed his thoughts about the legality of The Act of Supremacy and of his own trial. He concluded, "More have I not to say, my Lords, but that like as the Blessed Apostle, St. Paul was present and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now, both saints in heaven and shall continue there friends forever, so I trust, and shall pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together, to our everlasting salvation."

The morning of the sixth of July, Thomas Pope, his "singular friend," came to More's cell with the message that he was to die that day. More thanked him and also sent his thanks to the King for giving him the opportunity to prepare himself for death. More told Pope that he would pray for the King "both here and also in another world." Taking his leave, Pope could not restrain from tears. When More saw this, he comforted him with the words, "Quiet yourself, good Master Pope, and be not discomfited. For I trust that we shall, once in heaven, see each other full merrily, where we shall be sure to live and love together, in joyful bliss eternally." The example of St. Stephen learned so long before did not fail More at the end. On the scaffold he prayed for the King, insisting that he died "the king's good servant, but God's first." Within the next few minutes More joined his beloved Stephen in heaven, where they "shall continue friends forever."

It is more than his courage, more than his honesty, that draws us to St. Thomas More. It is the fact that holiness can be achieved by every one who truly seeks for it. We, like him, can choose a model to imitate in our lives according to our particular style and need, because in the final analysis all the saints are imitators of Christ. The busy affairs of this world, love and devotion to our family and friends, a sense of humor and mirth, are not incompatible with our love for God as long as we are ready to give them up, if God asks that of us.

Thomas More proves to us that a man can live and die a Christian and a courtier, a holy man and a humanist, a wise man and a wit. He personifies the truth that the greatest human is the saint, who is only a saint because he is truly human. May he teach us by his life what St. Stephen taught him — perfect love for God, perfect love for our neighbor, be he friend or enemy. Learning that, we, too, some day shall join St. Stephen and St. Thomas More where we shall "merrily all meet together, to our everlasting salvation."

On Serving the Church

Pope Paul delivered the following address at the general audience of June 21.

This short address, which we are obliged and happy to deliver to the faithful and visitors present at our weekly Wednesday audience, cannot but have as its theme our own person. Out of due discretion we have usually abstained from speaking of ourself, so convinced are we of our littleness, which is all the more manifest the more keenly we are aware of the responsibility of the apostolic office to which we have been called.



But today the anniversary, now the 15th, of our election to St. Peter's chair, obliges us to praise the Lord, who is accustomed to choose the lowly for the exercise of his ministry, for having entrusted the supreme guidance of his Church to our humble person. We are confident that we can adopt the sentence of a predecessor of ours, of far greater stature than ourself, St. Leo the Great, who, honoring the work of God in himself, left us the memorable words: He who conferred the dignity will give the strength.

Well, sons and brothers, what is our message? There is nothing great nor original in it, we are well aware. But it has sought to be consistent with that of our

predecessors, who abandoned the ephemeral panoply of the Church's regal countenance to allow her poor and neglected face appear in its original reality, stripped of every artificial ornament, but at the same time radiant with a superhuman beauty of its own. The latter is the reflection of an ineffable light, the beauty, never satisfied with its concrete and ideal form, which belongs to her, and which she tries to reach in the course of history, but which is already such as to document now, in a delightful apologia, the incarnate presence of the Word of God.

Oh! The miracle is not ours, but like a perpetual dawn which is the prelude to perfect splendor, she avails herself of a charism that is not hers, but at the same time was divinely bestowed upon her, and intended for her, that of divine Truth, expressed in human features. The Church in this century, consistent with characteristics that were also hers, and which now define her, more simply and more authentically, human and divine, is showing herself with the clarity of the principles which she announces, to give humanity a superhuman appearance, that of unity, and of peace, that of an incipient happiness, which for those who do not grasp the global extension of the Life inaugurated by Christ, seems a dream or a vain hope.

But yes! History, that is, the evolution of man in time, remains a drama, which, as it develops, branches off in opposite trends, which are more and more marked. See how on the one hand the power of matter becomes more perfect and gigantic, until it produces

the trauma of fear itself (. . . who can measure today the tragic dangers that science and technology, turned against human life, can hurl against the face of the earth?). See how, on the other hand, the sincerity and simplicity of nature seem to console mortal man, and restore to him confidence in existence.

There is so much good possible in the modern world, and there is so much evil possible that the fate of mankind seem inexorably compromised. But we are still optimistic. We still think that from the gifts offered to us by nature, there can be derived stupendous conditions for our temporal existence. But this picture of ours must be interpreted in the wider and truer plan which our religion dominates with its ineffable providence: the Cross towers over it, with its plan of sorrow and salvation.

At this point we should reveal the dominant thought of our office, that is, of our service for the world, for the Church. Well, we will say everything in a word. This thought, that is, this program, is for us the Second Vatican Council, which we celebrated in these past years and which we are now trying to apply in morals, in the living Spirit.

Brothers and sons, let us be faithful to this great event and let us make it a light for our history. May love of the Church assist us and guide us in order to make it really a lamp for our history and for our hope beyond the grave.