

The Church and the New Paganism

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church Has Difficulty Resisting Secularism

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

The suffering Church had survived the Avignon Captivity, the Western Schism, the conciliar movement and the fall of Constantinople (1453) to the Turks with little change in her life-style, and few reforms of the human defects which pestered her. But the Church had a more difficult time in resisting the secularism and the humanism of the age of the Renaissance.

This Renaissance age sought the rebirth of the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome. As an intellectual movement, the Renaissance did not shock the Church, which itself was an ancient society, and indeed had preserved the cultural traditions of Rome and passed them on to the tribes who invaded the Roman Empire during the Barbarian invasions.

St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century had employed the philosophy of Aristotle, as the early fathers of the Church had used Plato,

to explain and defend the revealed truths of the Faith. A whole school had grown up around Thomistic thinking, which encouraged the study of the Greek philosophers and the Roman lawyers.

It was in Italy that the ancient pagan customs, literature and art first began to influence politics, the arts, sculpture and morality. Although scholars dispute whether this humanistic period was pagan or Christian, there is no doubt that many of the people of the Renaissance age found a new set of values, and a secular morality which was centered not on God but on man.

The Renaissance man wanted to have a free and complete development of himself in all his humanity. Consequently, he divorced morality from religion, and concentrated on obtaining the greatest possible enjoyment of the pleasures, moral or immoral of this world.

Although the typical person of this

age did not deny the existence of God or of eternity, he relegated those thoughts to a subordinate role in determining the conduct of his life. It was this emphasis on the temporal and the pleasurable which shook the Church, many of whose leaders were not immune to the hedonism of the day.

Most of the writers of this period, many of whom were clerics and thus obtained their livelihood from the Church, dismissed the study of theology, reviled monasticism and the spiritual life, and sneered at self-discipline. Anti-clericalism became the popular sport.

Men such as Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, Erasmus, Machiavelli, and even Chaucer, with their glorification of the goodness of man, their bitter satire of things ecclesiastic, and their provocative stories about Church personages and religious life, helped to undermine the traditional Catholic faith and morals.

To be sure, the humanists of this period contributed mightily to learning and education, to the arts, to politics and literature, and gave the world treasures which it still enjoys. However, the neo-paganism of this age was extremely dangerous. Blind devotion to the past persuaded men to seek the solution of religious and moral questions, not in Christian revelation, but in the pages of pagan writers.

Many of these humanists regarded ecclesiastical authority as infringement on their liberty, which for them meant license. As a result, many of them, lay and clerical, led immoral or amoral lives, without any shame and with much acclaim. It never occurred to them that their Church would soon be scourged and would have to be reformed. Their pagan and humanistic philology undermined the moral and teaching authority of the Church and helped to pave the way for the Protestant Reformation.

Thomas More — 'A Saint for All Seasons'

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

This "man for all seasons" was born to a prosperous English family in 1478. His father, Sir John More, a prominent judge, sent Thomas to Oxford University in the same year that Columbus discovered America, and then to Lincoln's Inn, London, to read law. By 1515 Thomas was Speaker of the House of Commons. King Henry VIII knighted him and finally appointed him in 1529 Chancellor of the realm to replace the ill fated Cardinal Wolsey.

In 1532, St. Thomas resigned the chancellorship and retired to his home in Chelsea. He took this drastic step for two reasons: he had failed to stem the rising anti-papalism in the realm; and he refused to accept the declaration of the English Parliament that the marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, the mother of Queen Elizabeth I, was valid.

Although such refusal was treasonous, Henry VIII was reluctant to execute his valuable ex-Chancellor and instead imprisoned him in the Tower of London. But he could not forgive Sir Thomas when he refused to take the oath in support of the Act of Supremacy (1534) which decreed that "our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors shall be taken, accepted and reputed as the only supreme head of the Church of England, called 'Anglicana Ecclesia.'"

With John Fisher, the only English bishop to refuse the Oath of Supremacy, Sir Thomas was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. On

July 7, 1535, he begged the spectators to bear witness that he suffered death in and for the faith of



(Art by Robert McGovern)

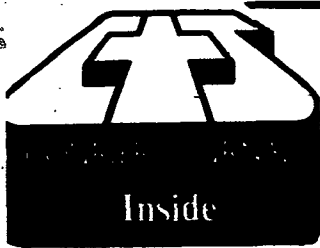
St. Thomas More

the Holy Catholic Church, "mounted the scaffold, and was beheaded. His head was affixed to London Bridge.

Four hundred years later, he was canonized a martyr for the unity of the Church and for papal authority over the Church.

St. Thomas More was a popular and delightful man, perhaps one of the more human saints in history. Married twice, he was a model husband and father. A man of the world, he radiated a spirituality and gentle humor; was tolerant of others, but absolutely resolute in his Catholic principles. He was a defender of the faith. His self-discipline in that humanistic age was extraordinary. While he was lingering in the Tower of London, he wrote down his meditations on the Passion of Our Lord in his "Dialogue of Comfort." Indeed, before he left for his beheading, he gave his daughter, Margaret, his most precious possession, his hair-shirt.

St. Thomas More is remembered in secular literature for his "Utopia," his description of life in an ideal world, where the only law would be the law of the Gospel. His humanism shines in those pages as does his Christian faith. Indeed, St. Thomas More was the epitome of a Christian humanist. Like some of the humanists, he was critical of abuses within the Church and longed for their reform. Unlike many humanists, he detested any disruption of Catholic unity. This "saint for all seasons" has delighted and inspired many people with his prayer: "And I shall pray for you and all your friends that we may merrily meet in heaven."



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