

St Thomas More: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first."

In the year 2010, on a visit to the United Kingdom, Pope Benedict XVI was invited to speak to the House of Commons. Assembled before him were the members of Parliament, all the living prime ministers, and the Anglican and Catholic bishops of England along with other invited notables. Early in his address, Benedict singled out one statesman from England's long parliamentary history as worthy of special honor: "As I speak to you in this historic setting, I think of the countless men and women down the centuries who have played their part in the momentous events that have taken place within these walls and have shaped the lives of many generations of Britons, and others besides. In particular, I recall the figure of Saint Thomas More, the great English scholar and statesman, who is admired by believers and non-believers alike for the integrity with which he followed his conscience, even at the cost of displeasing the sovereign whose "good servant" he was, because he chose to serve God first."

The moment was particularly poignant, since it was in the very same chamber in Westminster Hall that, some five hundred years earlier, Thomas More had been sentenced to death for maintaining his loyalty to the traditions of the Catholic Church.

The England into which Thomas More was born in 1478 was in the midst of a long dynastic war between two leading branches of England's royal family. This decades-long conflict, known as the Wars of the Roses, had included the bloodiest single day in English military history, and the country was left in a fragile and chaotic state when Henry Tudor defeated Richard III at Bosworth Field in 1485 and began ruling England as Henry VII. The Tudors would spend the next many decades attempting to secure their throne and, with it, the peace of the kingdom. Thomas More's fortunes were to be closely interwoven with those of the Tudor family.

Thomas More was a London man, born and bred. The London that More knew was a metropolis of perhaps sixty to seventy thousand people; it was the only city of significant size in England, many times larger than its nearest rival. It was also just beginning a period of rapid growth: by the end of the sixteenth century its population would burgeon to something like two hundred thousand souls. London took its position in the kingdom seriously and proudly guarded its freedoms and charters in dealing with king and parliament. More's father, Sir John More, was a noted city lawyer who held an influential position as a city judge, well connected to various London interests and often representing the city's concerns.

Sir John sent his only son, Thomas, to an excellent private school and then gained

a prestigious place for him, at age twelve, in the household of Cardinal Morton, the king's lord chancellor. The cardinal was a patron of learning, and was greatly taken by More's evident intelligence and ready wit. "This child here waiting at the table," he would say to his guests, "whoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvelous man."

Morton arranged for More's further education, sending him to Oxford where he lived from his fourteenth to his sixteenth year, engaged in the study of Greek and Latin literature. It seems likely that, had he followed his own inclinations, young Thomas would have remained at Oxford and there pursued a scholarly career. But his father had other plans for him: Thomas was to be a lawyer. Ready enough to fall in with his father's plans, More left Oxford and enrolled in the Inns of Court, where he spent the next six or so years learning the legal profession.

If we take stock of Thomas More at the time he was called to the bar in his twenty-second year, we will see a young man at the threshold of a career of outstanding promise. He was well-educated and highly talented: intelligent, administratively capable, wise beyond his years, and, what is rarer with men of great talent, likeable to people of all stations, with a wry sense of humor and a personality made for friendship. He was extremely well-connected: known to the legal world of London through his family and his time at the Inns of Court, recognized in royal circles through his service with Cardinal Morton, and familiar to the university world from his ties to some of the best-known scholars at Oxford and from his budding friendship with the greatest European scholar of the age, Erasmus of Rotterdam.

There was almost nothing such a man with so many advantages might not accomplish, and in the event, there is very little that Thomas More did not accomplish in his remarkable public career. He would go on to practice law with legendary skill, be elected by the city of London as under-sheriff, enter Parliament, regularly serve as one of the king's foreign ambassadors, hold the position of Speaker of the House of Commons, become high steward of both Oxford and Cambridge universities, sit on the royal privy council as one of the king's close friends and confidants, and ultimately become the first layman in English history to serve as lord chancellor. Along the way he would write works of literature, history, and theology that would gain him a European reputation and place him among the most famous Englishmen of his time. But as a young man, before plunging into that maelstrom of power, wealth, and prestige, Thomas stopped, as if at the edge of a cliff and spent the better part of four years forging an inner spiritual character that would mark him for the rest of his life.

Thomas More's Cultivation of the Interior Life: William Roper, Thomas More's son-in-law who wrote the earliest account of his life, put the matter simply enough, saying only that More "gave himself to devotion and prayer in the Charterhouse of London, religiously living there without vow about four years." That a man of More's potential would take so long a time to pursue a possible priestly vocation was remarkable enough. But that he would choose the Carthusians as the likely expression of that vocation was astounding. Not that it would have been surprising to find an ambitious young man advancing his career by means of the Church. One of More's older contemporaries provided a vivid example of that kind of active career. Thomas Wolsey, whose father had been a butcher, entered priestly orders and then rose, by talent and hard work, to become first bishop, then cardinal, then lord chancellor, then papal legate, eventually maintaining a position of wealth and dominance so great as almost to overshadow the king. But the monks of the Charterhouse (as the English called the Carthusian order) represented an entirely different kind of consecrated life. "Their rule was as austere and as faithfully practiced as any in the Church. A man came to the Carthusians not to satisfy ambition, but to bury it.

More lived among the Carthusians even as he practiced law, joining them in their prayers, fasts, and vigils, patterning his life on theirs as much as possible, and drinking in their spirit. That spirit and pattern remained with him, and provided the anchor that would keep him on a steady course through very heavy seas. The continuing influence of the Carthusians can be seen in many of the details of More's daily life. He built a small house for himself on his Chelsea estate, and he would rise early, like a monk praying vigils, spending four or five hours in prayer, study, and writing before he began the duties of the day. He would set aside the whole of each Friday for prayer and penitential exercises. He attended Mass daily, often performing the duties of altar-server. He continually wore a hair shirt under his normal clothing and would regularly take the discipline (self-flagellation). At table one of his children would read aloud from a spiritual author and More would lead the family in a discussion of the work. He would bring his family into the chapel each evening and pray Vespers with them. Such practices could seem to represent a kind of stifled contemplative vocation, one that might force More's household into an austere monastic existence and disturb the necessarily different rhythms of lay and family life. But it was part of More's genius that they produced nothing of the kind. More was able to translate the spirit of the Carthusians into a healthy expression of the active state. His family circle was as famous for its joy and good fellowship as for its piety, and Thomas himself was an irrepressibly joyful person who delighted in nothing so much as time spent merrily among friends, whom he had constantly in his house. He ran his household with such

gentleness that his daughters would sometimes purposely commit a fault just to experience the sweetness of their father's correction. More was not a layman pretending to be a monk; he was rather a serious Christian believer who had learned from the monks what it meant to cultivate the interior life, a task as important for the layman as for the contemplative and in some respects more difficult to maintain. The depth of his interior life enabled him to keep reality firmly before his eyes in the midst of a world and a calling that was constantly tending to distraction and illusion.

It has been said that the way we handle our leisure will determine how we do our work; hence the great importance of honoring the Lord's Day. If we use our leisure for genuine recreation, for renewing within ourselves and our communities a rootedness in the deepest truths, we will then be able to return to the business of the world and act with clarity and consistency. In Thomas More this principle can be seen at work in a particularly clear way. More's deep insertion into the invisible world, his daily practice of spending much of his energy on the matters of highest importance, gave him the strength and perspective that allowed him to live his active vocation so well and truly. We might ask what it was that gave More the courage and clarity to stand firm in the Catholic Faith when so many of his contemporaries, not necessarily bad-hearted men, grew so shaky in their stance. What was it that enabled him to resist the typical temptations of avarice and ambition that were so rampant around him? It was his constant habit of seeing the affairs of this passing life through the lens of eternal truths, of referring all things to their proper end. This habit of mind gave More's native courage and loyalty a coherent basis for withstanding the massive pressures placed upon him.

To give a few examples of this attitude of mind in action: More was notoriously poor for a man of his rank and station. He never pursued a position for the sake of wealth, and he often turned down money that he might legitimately have received. On one occasion the bishops of England, grateful for all the writing More was doing on behalf of the Catholic Faith, took thought together and on their own initiative raised a large sum of money, to the tune of four or five thousand pounds, and presented the gift to More. (More's typical yearly income was between sixty and one hundred pounds). Though he appreciated the gesture, More refused to receive the money. "My Lords," he said to them, "I would rather see it all cast into the Thames than I or any of mine should have the worth of even one penny."

The bishops were forced to return the money to each of those who had contributed. More similarly avoided fame in his literary pursuits. His most famous work, *Utopia*, was never intended for publication, and he was unhappy when it was

published. He once described those who attempted to gain a name and a legacy for themselves on earth "as if a gentleman thief, before he was hanged, were to leave a memorial of the arms of his ancestors painted on the prison wall."⁵ More avoided the royal court for a number of years and only agreed to take a position on the privy council when he thought that to continue to refuse would be ungrateful and insulting to the king. He once wrote to John Fisher, the bishop of Rochester: "It was with the greatest unwillingness that I came to Court, as everyone knows, and as the King himself in joke often throws in my face. I am as uncomfortable there as a bad rider is in the saddle."

There are some instructive instances of this cast of More's mind - his habit of holding the eternal in view - as it was expressed in contrast to that of his good friend, Thomas Howard, the third Duke of Norfolk. Norfolk was a rough and ready personality who, though not without convictions, intended to let his mind run in courses of worldly prudence alone. Unlike More, who tried to dodge high office, Norfolk was an ambitious politician who constantly sought ways to gain greater access to power; he successfully schemed to see two of his nieces become queens of Henry VIII (both of whom subsequently lost their heads). In interchanges between the two friends, the duke was ever acting the part of the serious and unsubtle man of affairs whose thought was confined to immediate circumstances, while More would respond, with a characteristic touch of irony, by broadening the question to embrace the whole of the invisible world. Once when the duke was dining at Chelsea, he came upon More in his chapel singing in the choir as if he were an acolyte or choir monk. The duke was surprised and displeased: "God body, God body my Lord Chancellor, a parish clerk, a parish clerk, you dishonor the King and his office!" "Nay," responded More smiling, "your Grace should not think that the King, your master and mine, will be offended with me for serving God his master, or count his office dishonored thereby."⁷ On another occasion, recognizing that More's stance toward the king's marital affairs would get him into serious trouble, the duke quoted him a line from the Book of Proverbs. "By the Mass, Mr. More! It is perilous striving with Princes, and therefore I would wish you somewhat to incline to the King's pleasure. For by God's body, Mr. More, 'the wrath of the king is death!'" "Is that all, my Lord?" responded Thomas. "Then there is no more difference between your Grace and me, but that I shall die today and you tomorrow."

The Christian Humanists and Church Reform: More's closest friends were a circle of men who had loosely gathered around a great reforming figure, the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, John Colet. In order to understand More's concern for Church reform and his view of the best way to bring it about, something should be

said of Colet and the wider movement that Colet helped to spark. In its day that movement was often called the "new learning"; it is now usually referred to as "Christian humanism."

It has often been noted that Christianity, and the civilization that embraced it, is founded on the fusion of two universal ideals: Hebrew religion and the Greek philosophical and cultural tradition. Christians have seen in this alloy a providential arrangement: already in the Christian Scriptures the Greek notion of the logos was tied to salvation history. Pope Benedict gave a recent expression of this traditional understanding: "The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought," he wrote, "did not happen by chance. The vision of St. Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: 'Come over to Macedonia and help us!' (see Acts 16:6-10)— - this vision can be interpreted as a 'distillation' of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry."⁹ As Christianity emerged from Israel in its early centuries and succeeded in converting the Roman Empire, these two ancient traditions were married to each other through the protracted efforts of the Church Fathers. The union of the two has proved very fruitful; but as in many good marriages, maintaining unity has not been without its tensions. There have not been lacking those who have wanted to purge the Church, and Christian society, of one of her two sources. Tertullian's famous challenge, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"¹⁰ has been taken up by many through the centuries, some siding with a pristine Athens, some advocating a pure Jerusalem. In times of widespread concern for the renewal of Christian society, it has been natural for thoughtful people to return ad fontes, to the civilizational sources of the society, both classical and Christian, in order to re-establish Christian culture on its original bases. Such times have been both turbulent and creative, as Christian and classical ideals have once again wrestled with each other and serious minds have attempted to forge a re-integration adapted to the new cultural context.

The sixteenth century was just such a time. The need for reform of both Church and society was evident, and a flood of new material from the ancient sources was bursting upon the scene, whether in works of classical Latin and Greek authors or in new editions of the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures, all now capable of being printed and disseminated to a rapidly growing educated readership. Inevitably, on one side were those who had become enamored of the pagan classical ideal and who sought to throw Christianity overboard; and on the other side, those who viewed any taint of classical influence as a blot on the purity of the Gospel. But the most characteristic current of renewal, as well as the most fruitful, sought to maintain and deepen both the biblical and the classical sources of Christian culture

by a renewed study of the ancient sources through the interpretive lens of the Church Fathers. This was the reform program of the Christian humanists. Its best-known representative was Erasmus, who was first inspired to invest his energies in this direction under the influence of John Colet. Thomas More wholeheartedly supported the reform program of Colet and Erasmus and generously contributed to it. In the breadth of his vision, the scope of his action, and the consistency of his character, More is perhaps the most impressive exemplar of the Christian humanist ideal produced by the sixteenth century.

John Colet had developed a new way of preaching, better suited to an educated congregation hungry for a clear exposition of the Gospel. Erasmus described it this way: "Colet used to preach in St. Paul's daily - this practice was entirely new - besides sermons on special occasions.... When he preached in St. Paul's, he used not to choose his subject at random from the Gospel or the Epistles, but preached courses of sermons on subjects such as the Lord's Prayer or the Creed, dealing with his matter in an orderly and complete way. He attracted large audiences, which included most of the chief men in the city and the Court." The humanists were often severe critics of the scholasticism favored by the universities, and it is sometimes said that they wanted to do away entirely with scholastic theology. It would be truer to say that they found the decayed and often sclerotic scholasticism of their day inadequate to meet the challenges of the time. More himself, who like many humanists had a deep appreciation for Thomas Aquinas, thought that true theology needed also to be steeped in the Scriptures and the Church Fathers, and that a theologian could not simply rely on scholastic summaries and anthologies, a view that the great scholastic theologians would themselves have agreed with. The hope of the Christian humanists was to bring to bear the whole of the Christian tradition upon the questions of the day.

The Christian humanists characteristically summed up their program as founded on "Christian virtue and godly learning." Their favored instrument for achieving this aim was a new way of teaching and a new kind of school. Colet founded St. Paul's School in 1509, still today one of England's leading private schools, where he pioneered the teaching of Greek along with Latin and expanded the curriculum to include other subjects. The students lived and studied in an atmosphere of intense Christian piety. Thomas More, too, though busily involved in affairs of state, established his own "school" in his home, where he and his tutors taught the new learning to his children and grandchildren. "Although no one denies that a man may be saved without a knowledge of Latin and Greek or of any literature at all," he said in defense of this uncommon practice, "yet learning, even worldly learning, prepares the mind for virtue."

What was yet more rare for his time, More taught his daughters the same subjects and expected of them the same educational accomplishments as his son. Erasmus helped the project by writing Latin and Greek texts for More's household school. More delighted in doing lessons with his children beyond almost anything in life. Once when he was away from home on a diplomatic mission, he wrote to his son and three daughters:

Now I expect from each of you a letter almost every day. I will not admit excuses - John makes none - such as want of time, the sudden departure of the letter-carrier, or want of something to write about. How can a subject be wanting when you write to me, since I am glad to hear of your studies or of your games, and you will please me most if, when there is nothing to write about, you write about that nothing at great length. Only this: whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles, it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully.

To the school tutor he once wrote: "I prefer learning joined with virtue to all the treasures of kings." The Christian humanist emphasis on virtue and learning taught through schools would later find its most complete and effective expression in the Jesuit Ratio Studiorum (The Official Plan for Jesuit Education), disseminated by their hundreds of influential colleges.

Those in the circle of English humanists to which More belonged were also ardent promoters of Church reform. Here again, John Colet provides the earliest example. Colet was a severe critic of the typical ecclesiastic of his day. "Never was there more necessity of your endeavors," he preached to a convocation of bishops and higher clergy gathered at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1512, "for the Church - the Spouse of Christ - which he wished to be without spot or wrinkle, is become foul and deformed... nothing has so disfigured the face of the Church as the secular and worldly way of living on the part of the clergy." Colet then gave a long and detailed description of the clerical sins of the time and entreated the convocation to attend to priestly corruption without delay. "This reformation and restoration in ecclesiastical affairs must begin with you, our fathers, and then descend upon us your priests and the clergy. If you wish to see our motes, first take the beams out of your own eyes." According to Colet and More, the need was not for new laws and new ideas; rather it was "for the observance of those already enacted."

The Church had received from Christ her form, her rites, and the truths she taught. These were excellent, but were now overlaid with worldliness and sin. Thus a moral reformation was demanded: humble and holy bishops instead of worldly and ambitious ones; zealous and learned priests instead of lazy and uneducated ones.

Once the bishops and clergy were reformed, the reformation of the laity could proceed successfully.

The Church was Christendom's leading public institution, and Thomas More naturally and appropriately brought his concern for Church reform into his public duties. More was dismayed by the teaching of Martin Luther, not because Luther called for reform, but because he thought Luther to be engaged in something other than reform. Having steeped himself in the early Church Fathers, More knew that the apostolic Church to which the Lutherans appealed was very different from what they claimed. He viewed Luther's project as an attempt to change Christianity in its fundamental essence. He also thought that the new doctrines would mean the ultimate dissolution of Christian society. He expended a great deal of his literary labor on works of controversy in which he attempted to counter prevailing Protestant ideas, which he thought pointed to a coming crisis of faith. Once when his son-in-law Roper was rejoicing at the level of piety to be found in England, More replied: "It is now indeed as you say, my son; but a time will soon come when you will see all this zeal for religion, together with us and others who cultivate it, brought into contempt and despised, and made of no more account than we make of these poor little ants."

Thomas More's Final Days and Death: The last days of Thomas More - an extraordinary end to an extraordinary life - are well known through movies and books. The trial scene in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* does a good job of reproducing from eyewitness accounts what went on at More's trial. Yet the question may still be asked: For what exactly did Thomas More die? What were the key issues involved, and why did More take such a solitary stand against so much pressure? From a distance of many years and after much sifting of evidence, it is a near universal judgment that More behaved nobly in acting as he did; but this was hardly obvious to people of his time. The king and his immediate councilors such as Thomas Cromwell were pressuring More to fall in with their plans and were ready to kill him - treacherously if no other way could be found - if he continued to prove recalcitrant. But there were many in the realm, theologians and bishops of good reputation, even members of More's own family, who had a hard time understanding why he held his ground so insistently.

To rehearse the main facts of the case: in 1528, King Henry, recognizing that he was not going to produce an heir through Queen Catherine, and falling under the spell of Anne Boleyn, a lady-in-waiting at Court, determined to procure a divorce from Catherine and to take Anne as queen. This was not the sort of issue a man like More would normally have become involved with, much less die for. Kings

were hardly noteworthy for good behavior toward their queens, and they had a way of securing what they wanted in such matters. Had this been the whole of the case, More would have steered clear of it, especially since it dealt with canonical questions beyond his responsibility as a layman at court. Things grew more complicated when the pope, who by long custom handled canonical cases of royalty, proved unwilling to give the king an annulment from the marriage. Still, for a king and a pope to find themselves at loggerheads was no new situation. But Henry, who intended to have his own way, went beyond simply ignoring the papal ruling or trying to have it changed. He had Parliament pass an act, called the Act of Succession, that not only established Anne as queen, but that declared Henry himself to be Supreme Head of the Church in England. This fateful step took Henry far beyond a mere quarrel with Pope Clement and involved him in a conflict that transcended any single issue. Monarchs in the Past had sometimes fought with popes and had sometimes gained concessions from them; but none had so radically broken with the very idea of the universal papacy as to declare themselves pope in their own domains. Given the turmoil around the question of papal authority that had been stirred up throughout Europe by Protestant reformers, Henry's act took on a huge significance.

Yet even then it was not clear that More need be personally involved. When he saw the way things were tending, he realized that he could no longer conscientiously represent the king to Parliament. He resigned his position as lord chancellor, a post he had held for about three years, and returned to private life. Wise in the ways of the law, More was determined to speak to no one about either the marriage or the declaration of the king's supremacy, hoping thereby to avoid a clash with the king's government and to await better days. But the silence of Thomas More was deafening. Both in England and beyond, his reluctance to speak about the affair seemed to cast doubt on its legitimacy, despite the acquiescence of nearly the whole of the English episcopacy, the notable exception being Bishop John Fisher. To coerce compliance, an oath was devised for swearing to the Act of Succession. More was among the first to whom the oath was administered. He refused to take it, continuing to maintain complete silence concerning his own views.

After numerous trumped-up charges that More was easily able to deflect, the king grew impatient and had him thrown into the Tower of London. There More remained for fifteen months, subjected to pressures of many kinds. To the end he kept his sense of the invisible world, along with his typically ironic handling of his own circumstances; the two habits of mind were closely connected. For instance, when first being consigned to prison, the lieutenant of the Tower told More how

sad he was that he could only supply him with poor prison fare. "I like your cheer right well," More replied. "But the moment I cease to enjoy it, then thrust me out of your doors and tell me to go hang!"¹⁷ On another occasion, a former associate was sent from the Court to convince More to alter his views and to take the oath. More welcomed the man to his cell and told him that he had indeed changed his mind. Excited and nearly overwhelmed by the success of his attempt, the fellow immediately jumped up and went to the king, telling him of More's change of opinion. Henry, knowing More's character somewhat better, sent the fellow back to see if he could get More to put his change of mind down on paper. When the man returned to the Tower with that request, More explained that he had indeed changed his mind, but that he had not been given time to make clear what he meant. Previously he had been intending to shave before going to execution; "but now I have entirely changed my mind, and I intend to allow my beard to suffer the same fate as my head." The abashed courtier was forced to return and report More's response to the king. "So," said Henry, "does this man still mock us with his jests."

After fifteen months in the Tower, More was brought to trial and accused of treason by means of the perjured testimony of Richard Rich, one of Thomas Cromwell's aides. Despite the flimsiness of the evidence, the jury deliberated for a mere fifteen minutes before returning a verdict of guilty. Once the verdict was given and it was clear that silence would be of no more use, More opened his mind to the court. A passage from the *Life of Thomas More*, based on eyewitness accounts, is worth quoting at some length, as it makes clear just what principles More understood himself to be defending: 'Seeing that I am condemned, God knows how justly, for the discharge of my conscience I will now speak freely of your statute ... I confess that I turned my studies to that matter [the idea that a King could be head of the Church] for a full seven years. But never could I find in any writing of the Doctors whom the Church approves, that a layman ever had been, or ever could become, head of the spirituality.'

At this point the Chancellor interrupted More, saying: 'So then, Mr. More, you wish to be thought wiser and more conscientious than all others, that is to say, all the Bishops, all the nobility and the whole kingdom.'

More replied: 'My Lord Chancellor, for one Bishop whom you may produce for your side, I will bring forward a hundred saintly and orthodox prelates who subscribe to my opinion: for your one Parliament, and God knows of what sort it is, I have on my side all the councils that have been held in the whole Christian world for more than a thousand years; and for your one kingdom of England I have

with me all the kingdoms of Christianity.'

Then to the lords present who had passed the Act of Succession, More said: I say that you have done very wrong in passing this law, for in this realm you stand alone, in opposition to the unanimous consent of Christendom. Your law has dissolved the unity, the peace and the concord of the Church, although the Church is, as all know, a body which is one, universal, whole and undivided, and therefore in matters of religion nothing can be decided without the general consent of the whole."

The idea has become popular, in part due to the drift of Robert Bolt's screenplay, that Thomas More died, not so much as a witness to truth, but rather as a martyr for the rights of personal conscience. This portrayal fits well with the modern notion that the highest authority in all matters is the individual mind. On this reading, More's stance was noble because he was "true to himself." But this is to misunderstand More. He was indeed true to himself, and there is a sense in which he did die for conscience. But More held - in this echoing the great tradition - that an authentic human personality was not a self-generated concoction, and that conscience did not simply coincide with personal opinion. An adequate understanding of oneself and a rightly formed conscience needed to be founded on truth; they needed to accord with reason and revelation. His charge against those who were attempting to coerce his agreement against his conscience—whether they did so through malice or ignorance—was that they had overthrown the truth. He pointed to the whole of the Christian tradition as his witness, and he took his stand, not on private opinion, but on the universal testimony of the Church. He conformed his conscience to that testimony.

A later governor of England, Winston Churchill, caught this aspect of More's stand against his king. Churchill wrote, "They [More and John Fisher] realized the defects of the existing Catholic system, but they hated and feared the aggressive nationalism which was destroying the unity of Christendom. They saw that the break with Rome carried with it the risk of a despotism freed from every fetter. More stood forth as the defender of all that was finest in the medieval outlook. He represents to history its universality, its belief in spiritual values, and its instinctive sense of otherworldliness.

Years before More's trial, William Roper, seeing that his father-in-law stood high in royal favor, had congratulated More on his friendship with the king. More had replied: "I find His Grace my very good lord indeed; and I believe he as singularly favors me as any subject within this realm. Yet I may tell you I have no cause to be

proud thereof, for if my head could win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go."

When Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor, heard the news of More's death, he sent for the English Ambassador and said to him: "We understand that the King, your master, has put his faithful servant and grave, wise counselor, Sir Thomas More, to death." The ambassador feigned ignorance, but Charles replied: "It is too true. And this will we say, that if we had been master of such a servant, of whose doing ourself have had these many years no small experience, we would rather have lost the best city of our dominions than to have lost such a worthy counselor."

More was led to the scaffold by the lieutenant of the Tower; he was so weakened by his time in prison that he could hardly mount the steps. "I pray you, Mr. Lieutenant," he said, "see me safe up. For my coming down, let me shift for myself." He declared that he was "the King's good servant, but God's first." He was beheaded, and his head was stuck on a pike on London Bridge. He had his hair shirt sent to his daughter Margaret the day before he died. It is now to be found in Allen Hall, the seminary for London's priests, on the grounds of his old estate of Chelsea.