

ST. THOMAS MORE

FUTURE ages when chronicling the canonization of Thomas More by Pope Pius XI, on the 19th May, 1935, may perhaps ask their contemporaries to account it a pivotal event in the history of mankind. First of all it is an event in the city of Rome, which some cartographers claim to be the geographical centre of the habitable earth. Moreover it is a solemn and irrevocable nomination to the Peerage of Mankind made by a spiritual sovereign whose native land and whose official metropolis are Italy and Rome. Lastly, it is the strange almost bewildering action of an Italian giving supreme ennoblement to an Englishman beheaded by an English king four hundred years ago.

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To those of us who know that Rome is Rome and that Simon Bar-Jona is Peter, because Jesus, Son of Mary, is Son of God, the canonization of an English Lord Chancellor or of a French shepherd-lass or of a South American half-caste is but the arrival of the expected. Rome either is or is prepared to be the nursing mother of all nations, i.e., of all groups of human beings welded into one by the seemingly opposite forces of authority and liberty. It is not a matter of surprise to us Catholics, therefore, that an Englishman of the English should be given world-wide honour and recognition by the same Italian-centred force which one day sent the Levantine, Augustine of Tarsus, to weld warring settlers into the religious, and incidentally into the political, unity called England.

If at times Alma Mater Ecclesia tried to meet her somewhat spendthrift outgoings by demands upon her children, no accountant would dare to show that she had demanded over-payment for her nursing and teaching cares. And although her children, like average children, did not part easily with money even to their mother, it took even more money and much bloodshed to take from one or two of them the sense that Rome was their mother, and they were her

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children. On her part, and these canonizations of the Englishmen John Fisher and Thomas More prove it, Rome never looked on them as other than her children even when they refused to call her mother.



Here we may consider with grief the breaking-away from the marvel which Rome had wrought when she made the unique great thing called Europe—the first authentic United States—and at the same time, as a weaver makes warp and woof, had made the unique little things called England, France, Castile, Florence, Venice, Siena and the rest.

Hardly had Rome of the martyred Apostles wrought this marvel than an epidemic of megalomania made nationalism the be-all and end-all of political action. We are still suffering in Europe and elsewhere not only from this action but from the almost more pathological reactions which it is inducing.

Such a reaction has made Russia the vortex of the world's Greatest Revolution following the world's Greatest War. The genius who turned *Das Kapital* from a book into a vast social structure, with its cosmopolitanism and its peace "of the strong man keeping his court," had no delusions about egocentric nationalism. Lenin knew his Communist venture would have reached its norm if Moscow became the capital not only of a New Russia but of a New World. The ideal Communist State might or might not have Moscow for its centre; but it must have the whole world for circumference. Were Lenin alive to-day he might rightly wonder if, under other generals, his grandiose plan of a Workers' World-State had not miscarried. A Seventeen Years' Plan, far from realizing or even furthering his Workers' World-State, has welded a Nazi and Fascist wall of steel round that western frontier which leads to the most organized masses of the world's workers.

Meanwhile Rome—not of the Fascists but of the Faithful—has canonized the two great Englishmen, John Fisher and Thomas More; because, Jesus Christ being God-made-man,

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Rome is not the capital of Italy and the Italians but of the world and of mankind.

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This primary and important view of the canonization of Thomas More is common to all canonizations whether they be of martyred Cardinals and martyred Lord Chancellors or of shepherd-lasses like St. Joan of Arc and St. Bernadette.

But the canonization of the martyred Lord Chancellor, the writer of *Utopia* and the idol of sixteenth century Humanists has such a plenary fitness with our epoch that it suggests the guiding action of other than mere human powers.

Three things necessary for man's social life are now everywhere imperilled—Liberty, the Family, Property. But search as we may in the history of any country we shall not easily find a man whose canonization would mean such a public recognition of these foundations of social stability. No man of equal rank and recognition was so resolute an exponent and defender of man's essential right to Liberty, the Family, and Property.

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We have called these things *three*; but in almost the highest sense these three are *one*. They are like the three straight lines which are the minimum needed for a self-contained figure. The psychological defence of Liberty is the Family (or the Home); the economic defence of the Family is Property (or the Homestead).

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More's attitude to *Property* is sometimes judged by his *Utopia*, or rather by that first manuscript kernel of *Utopia* which was occasioning such misunderstanding that he had to supplement it for publication. But we must not overlook two things in judging the original *Utopia*. First, it belongs to that national genius which was to give us the masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels* and that other masterpiece *Alice in Wonderland*. All three works are masterpieces in the national genius for whimsicality and in the rhetorical figure which the Roman rhetorician called "*Exaggeratio*."

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Secondly, we must not forget that at the time when even Humanism as well as incipient Lutheranism was attacking the religious orders More's *Utopia* is almost an elaborate apology for the main feature of the religious orders, namely their collective life.

More's attitude towards property (and especially towards landed property¹) may be judged by his actions. First, he sought to give his family "ample room and verge enough" by transferring the home from amidst the herb-sellers of Bucklesbury to the riverside at Chelsea. Even if this change was mainly to be in easy reach of Fisher, who lived at Lambeth Marsh across the river, it was also because at Chelsea he was in touch with green fields, plough-land and the barns and houses of a farm. If, as his most recent biographer² says, he there re-installed in more suitable surroundings his "small patriarchal monastic Utopia" it was because the Utopians wisely set great store by the land and thought no motive for war more valid than that for occupying unused land. At More's Chelsea Utopia the men house-servants when free from house-services had to work on the land.

His second action in defence of property was his *Supplication of Souls*. It was written in answer to a book, *The Supplication of Beggars*, by Simon Fish, which had been written in order to stimulate Henry VIII (if he needed stimulating!) to confiscate all Church property. More was too great a jurist as well as lawyer not to see that ecclesiastical property could be confiscated only on a principle that would legalize the confiscation of all property—even the property of the confiscators.

We are not arguing for or against the fact that this ecclesiastical property was badly administered. The matter of fact is not so important as the matter of principle. Yet the matter of fact is not clearly against the ecclesiastics when even some of the reformers groan that the "monasteries at

¹ *Property* and *landed property* are quite distinct, yet commonly confused. This primary confusion leads to a further confusion more confounded.

² Prof. R. Chambers, *Thomas More*, p. 178.

least kept hospitality, let out their farms at a reasonable price, nourished schools, brought up youth in 'good letters,' whereas the lay-supplanters do none of all these things."

It is alleged by some modern historians with more memory than insight for facts, that this ecclesiastical property was notoriously ill-managed. If this allegation is true, then More's defence is all the more significant. It was clearly the fundamental social plea: "Abuse does not destroy use."

A dramatic incident confirmatory of this principle occurred during the passing of the Welsh Disestablishment Bill. Lord Hugh Cecil had attempted to use the *fulmen theologicum* against Disestablishment by calling it the equivalent of Sacrilege. But he was probably not prepared for the *fulmen Cymricum* of Mr. Lloyd George who expressed amazement at a Cecil using such threats when the threatener came of a family whose hands were dripping with the fat of sacrilege. It was almost brutal; but unanswerable. And in some of the plain speaking in More's *Supplication of Souls* its writer shows himself the defender not so much of the institution of monasticism as of the still more fundamental institution of property.

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More's defence of the Family must rank amongst the priceless heirlooms of mankind. It took two channels of activity—one was the defence of Queen Catherine of Aragon; the other was his own family life with his children and, before he died, with his children's children.

He defended the Spanish lady who became England's Queen not because he was a great jurist but because he was a courteous Englishman, a loving husband, a devoted father. As a layman, and even as a lay judge, the ecclesiastical judgment lay beyond his jurisdiction and duty. But his silence was rightly looked upon by the king and the king's men as Catherine's most stubborn defence. On July 1, 1535, when More was tried in Westminster, his last words of self-explanation were these: "I call and appeal to God whose only sight pierceth into the very depth of man's heart, to be my witness. Howbeit, it is not for the Supre-

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macy so much that ye seek my blood, as for that I would not condescend to the marriage.”

To attempt a description of More's family life would be to fail, as a thousand have already failed, to supersede what More's friend and fellow-humanist, Erasmus, did once in his letter to Ulrich von Hutten. The cynical unwanted genius whose birth-shame was largely hidden from all but himself by the early death of the authors of his shame, the embittered fugitive from vows which were ill-considered and, perhaps, ill-kept, the lonely, affection-famished heart which had never known the welcome of a home, came upon More's almost idyllic home at an age when present joy could easily turn all memory to regret.

Little that the humanists of his day have written, little even of what was written by this Prince of humanists, will show right of entry to the immortality of letters. But this letter, in the language of Cicero, sketching with Holbein realism and grace the home of a gentleman, scholar and saint, has set its writer, with Cicero, amongst the master craftsmen of the word.

Erasmus has written, not books merely, but a library. And he has attempted such feats as to outstrip St. Jerome in translating the Greek of the New Testament into Latin. How much or how little of this bulk of humanistic Latin will reach the immortality of survival we cannot tell. But scholars are agreed that a prophecy of survival has greatest hope in that fragment which the Holbein of letters once wrote to vent the joy of his first welcome into an English home.

St. Thomas More's defence of Liberty may be approached by recalling two incidents.

When he was Lord Chancellor a king's messenger came to Chelsea summoning him to the king's presence. The messenger found More not at home but in Chelsea Parish Church hearing or perhaps serving Mass. One version of the story has it that the messenger, who was no other than the Duke of Norfolk, chid "his Majesty's Chancellor" for

playing such a lowly part as serving-man to a simple priest. But More replied (as indeed he might well have replied to such a chiding), "His Majesty will not be offended that I am serving his Master and mine." And the story, under whatsoever form it is told, always ends that the king was not offended.

The second incident with its most obvious significance may be told in the words of More's latest biographer.³ "Charles (V, the Emperor) wrote directly to More, sending the letter through his ambassador. But More very properly refused to receive it. He begged (the ambassador) Chapuys not even to pay him a visit. He protested that, although his loyalty to Henry ought to have placed him above suspicion, any communication with Charles would be unwise. (In his own words) *it might deprive him of the liberty* which he had always used in speaking boldly to King Henry. . . . And More went on to tell Chapuys that these things concerned him no less than his life, not only for the sake of Charles and the Queen, but for the sake of Henry and of England."



These two incidents, seemingly a world apart, are really one or at one in the world of infinite reality and ultimate worth where More's soul had chosen to dwell. For this loyal subject of the King of England and for the no less loyal subject of the King of Kings, liberty did not mean either an end in itself or an end to all authority and restraint. More's life showed clearly his belief in two forms of human liberty, the lesser or lower, and the greater or higher. There was a lesser liberty which set a man free from some hindrance. But there was a greater or higher which set a man free to aim at what he thought highest and best.

How delicately is More's sense of these two liberties functioning when alone amongst his fellow jurists and fellow king's-men he goes to the block for disloyalty to the king. Henry's royal conscience functioned so abnormally even for Renaissance monarchs that the most anti-papal historians

³ Chambers, *ut. sup.*, p. 250.

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might find it hard to be sure that all whom he put to death for disloyalty were lawfully put to death.

It was only by the passing of new laws that men like More could be brought to death. But the death-charge could be justified by the death of the old moral laws which even Plato and the pagan Greeks knew to be the foundations of all statecraft.

On July 6, 1535, when More's head yielded to the Tudor axe it was not merely a Londoner who with a jest was teaching London how to die, it was a man dying in defence of human liberty, a father dying in defence of the Home, an English father dying in defence of the Homestead.

Fifty, then, four hundred years after the Tudor king set More's head on London Bridge for all London to see, the Vicar of Jesus Christ has set More's life on the altar, for the whole world to see.

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