

## The Feastday of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More Sunday 9 July 2017



A detail from Hans Holbein's portrait of St Thomas More

St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More were the most prominent opponents of King Henry VIII's plan to take control of the Catholic Church in England in 1534. The King would usurp the title of Head of the Church of England in response to the Pope's refusal to grant him a divorce from his lawful wife, Venerable Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Queen Isabella of Spain, so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. In addition to satisfying his lustful desires, King Henry wished to have a new wife so that he could have a male heir to the throne of England. Sadly, the same situation which spurred King Henry to divorce and remarry and still receive Holy Communion (in his own Church) is the scenario that is now present in the Roman Catholic Church where some progressives wish to give Holy Communion to divorced and remarried Catholics. In the sixteenth century, this was a catastrophic situation which caused a great many Catholics to die for the Catholic faith or to lose their jobs and property because they would not go along with King Henry's plans. This is why we honour two of most notable martyrs in England, St. John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, and St. Thomas More, the Chancellor of England.

Fr. Alexander Lucie-Smith commented on the importance of the martyrdom of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More to the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century: **"Today the Catholic Church celebrates two great English saints and martyrs. I am forever grateful to my history master at Ratcliffe College, back in the day, Fr. Bill Curran, who explained this great truth to me: 'They were martyrs because they were saints, not saints because they were martyrs.'** How true that is! Both John Fisher and Thomas More were men of exemplary life, one a bishop, one a lawyer and family man. And it was

because they lived such upright lives that they were content to be martyred for the faith.

**"It is often held, correctly so, that Fisher and More were martyrs for the rights of conscience. Certainly, both men believed, as does the Church, that there are certain rights that the State can never arrogate for itself, and that includes those matters which are matters of conscience. But to see Fisher and More going to their deaths for freedom of religion, and for the rights of the individual against those of the over-mighty state, victims of Tudor totalitarianism, is only part of the story.**

**"Both died for the integrity of the Catholic Church. Both firmly held that what Henry VIII wanted to do was not simply wrong, but impossible. A King could not be head of the Church; there was no such thing as the Church 'of England'; there was one Catholic Church, holy and indivisible, under the visible headship of the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. The Pope of the day, Paul III, understood this, and that is why he made Fisher a cardinal, much to the fury of Henry VIII. The scarlet of the Cardinalate is the sign that members of the Sacred College are prepared to shed their blood for the faith, yet St John Fisher remains the only Cardinal who has ever been martyred. Contemporaries of Fisher and More also understood that the Papal Supremacy was what was at stake, and many of them, such as Bishop Bonner, indulged in some very impressive mental gymnastics to try and find reasons for the royal supremacy in the Church's tradition.**

**"But the royal supremacy, then as now, was never more than a religious fiction covering up a political necessity. Nor is England the only country to have gone down this route, but wherever the State has grabbed control of the Church, the result has been bad for the State and even worse for the Church. Moreover, the concept of a 'national Church' is clearly a bad one, and the alliance between faith and nationalism deeply deforming for faith.**

St. Thomas More, "A Man for All Seasons"

In a very popular stage play and movie of the 1960's, "*A Man for All Seasons*," means "a

man for all occasions, whether happy or serious." It is a quotation by Robert Whittington, a contemporary of More, who in 1520, said: "More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning." St. Thomas More is seen as a man who was one of the most outstanding scholars of his time and a man of profound piety. In his early years he had thought of a religious vocation: "His mind wavered for some time between joining the Carthusians or the Observant Franciscans, both of which orders observed the religious life with extreme strictness and fervour. In the end, apparently with the approval of Colet (his confessor), he abandoned the hope of becoming a priest or religious, his decision being due to mistrust of his powers of perseverance. Erasmus, his intimate friend and confidant, writes on this matter as follows (Epp. 447): 'Meanwhile he applied his mind to exercises of piety, looking to and pondering on the priesthood in vigils, fasts, and prayers and similar austerities. In which matter he proved himself far more prudent than most candidates who thrust themselves rashly into that arduous profession without any previous trial of their powers. The one thing that prevented him from giving himself to that kind of life was that he could not shake off the desire for the married state. He chose therefore, to be a chaste husband rather than an impure priest.'" (Erasmus's opinion has now been of a disordered priesthood abandoned even by non-Catholic writers). St. Thomas More was the first Chancellor of England who was not a cleric. As chancellor his efficiency 'was so great that the supply of causes was actually exhausted, an incident commemorated in the well-known rhyme:

'When More some time had Chancellor been  
'No more suits did remain,  
'The lie will never more be seen,  
'Till More be there again.'

"In March 1534, the Act of Succession was passed which required all who should be called upon to take the oath acknowledging the issue of Henry and Anne as legitimate heirs to the throne, and this was added a clause repudiating 'any foreign authority, prince or potentate.' On April 14, More was summoned to Lambeth to take the oath and on his refusal he was committed to custody to the Abbot of Westminster. Four days later, he was removed to the Tower (of London)..." Of his death Addison wrote in the Spectator (No. 349) "...that

innocent mirth which had been so conspicuous in his life did not forsake him to the last ... his death was a piece of his life. There was nothing in it new, forced or affected. He did not look upon the severing of his head from his body as a circumstance that ought to produce any change in the disposition of his mind.'" (G, Roger Hudleston, Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XIV, 1910, p. 602-3)

#### England's Most Learned and Holy Bishop

"By Bull dated 14 October, 1504, John Fisher was advanced to the Bishopric of Rochester, and in the same year Chancellor of Cambridge University, to which he was re-elected annually for ten years and then appointed life. At this date, he is said to have acted as tutor to Prince Henry, afterwards Henry VIII. As a preacher his reputation was so great that in 1509 when King Henry VII and Lady Margaret died, Fisher was appointed to preach the funeral oration on both occasions; these sermons are still extant....He has also been named, though without any real proof, as the true author of the royal treatise against Luther entitled 'Assertio septem sacramentorum', published in 1521 which won the title 'Defender of the Faith' for Henry VIII. Before this date Fisher had denounced various abuses in the Church, urging the need for disciplinary reforms, and in this year he preached at St. Paul's Cross on the occasion when Luther's books were publicly burned.

"When the question of Henry's divorce from Queen Catherine arose, Fisher became the queen's chief supporter and most trusted counsellor. In this capacity he appeared on the queen's behalf in the legates' court, where he startled his hearers by the directness of his language and most of all by declaring that, like St. John the Baptist, he was ready to die on the behalf of the indissolubility of marriage... In November, 1529, the 'Long Parliament' of Henry's reign began its series of encroachments on the Church. Fisher as a member of the upper house, at once warned Parliament that such acts could only end in utter destruction of the Church in England." (G, Roger Hudleston, Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. VIII, 1910, p. 462-3) Because he would not take the oath to the Act of Succession acknowledging the issue of Henry and Anne Boleyn as legitimate heirs to the throne, he

was sent to the Tower of London. On 17 June 1535, he was arraigned in Westminster Hall and convicted of treason because he denied the king to be the supreme head of the Church. When he was decapitated and his head stuck on a pole on London Bridge for two weeks, it excited so much attention for its **“ruddy and life-like appearance”** that it was thrown into the Thames River (its place being taken by that of Sir Thomas More less than a month later).

On 29 June, we celebrated the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in tribute to those two great apostles and leaders of the early Church. Drawing a parallel between these two saints of the church in her infancy and those whose lives we are celebrating today, Fr. Lucie-Smith commented, that this is: **“the traditional time to show our loyalty to the See of Peter, and to acknowledge that the authority of the See is founded in the words of Jesus Christ Himself. I am sure both Saints John Fisher and Thomas More are rejoicing in heaven at the way the Papacy survived the storms of the Reformation. As then, as always: ‘ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia, ibi vita eterna’: where Peter is, there is the Church, there is eternal life. May Saints John Fisher and Thomas More continue to inspire us, and bear witness to the truth for which they died.”** *Catholic Herald 22 June 2015.*

### **Merry England Destroyed**

As we look back in time on this period and heroic life and death of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, it is most important to put all these events in perspective. The Protestant historian William Cobbett in his book, *“A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland,”* comments on these times: **“It was not a ‘reformation,’ but a ‘devastation,’ of England, which was, at the time when this event took place, the happiest country, perhaps, that the world had ever seen. p. 21....No Englishman worthy of that name, worthy of a name which carries along with it sincerity and a love of justice; no real Englishman can have contemplated the foul deeds, the base hypocrisy, the flagrant injustice, exposed in the foregoing pages without blushing for his country.” p. 50** Cobbett. St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher represent the finest and holiest of men in these times; their martyrdoms cry out from these times to all of us to imitate them in their hungering for justice at a time when evil dominated the whole state under King Henry VIII.