

St. Thomas More

BORN 1477 OR 1478; DIED 1535

MARTYR

FEAST DAY: JUNE 22

THE PROTESTANT revolt was, from its earliest days, a rebellion against the authority of the Pope as divinely appointed to guide and guard the Church Jesus founded. St. Thomas More died for his unwavering determination to recognize the authority of the papacy as superior to that of the king.

Thomas was born in London, England, the only surviving son of John More, a lawyer and judge, and his first wife Agnes Granger. At twelve, he became a page to the Archbishop of Canterbury, also at that time Chancellor, a high royal office. Two years later, the Archbishop sent Thomas to be educated at Oxford. There his father allowed him little money, thereby keeping him from leading a dissolute life at the university. He remained there for four years, and his father then sent him to study law. Thomas completed his legal studies three years later and entered into legal practice. He quickly became successful and enjoyed great popularity, for he was not only brilliant but also wonderful and witty company. However, he seriously considered becoming a monk or priest, lived for four years in a monastery and following the schedule of prayer before and after work. He read the Fathers of the Church and gave a series of lectures on St. Augustine's *City of God*. Eventually, Thomas' confessor advised against a life in religion.

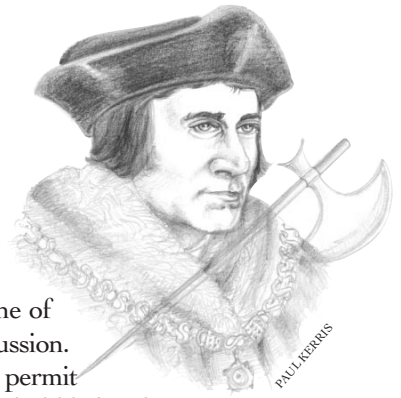
At twenty-seven, Thomas married Jane Colt. In the six short years of their extremely happy marriage, three daughters and a son were born. Following Jane's untimely death, he married a widow, Alice Middleton, a kind, capable, and sensible woman who had three children of her own. This marriage was comfortable but not as happy as his first. Although both had a sense of humor, neither appreciated the other's. She was concerned that he lacked ambition, while he was concerned about her vanity. Thomas laid great stress on educating his children, even the girls in an age when this was not usually done. The family estate was filled with unusual pets — birds, monkeys, foxes, ferrets, weasels. He also carefully brought his children up in a life of prayer and study of Scripture. During the family meals, which included the servants, an episode from the Scriptures

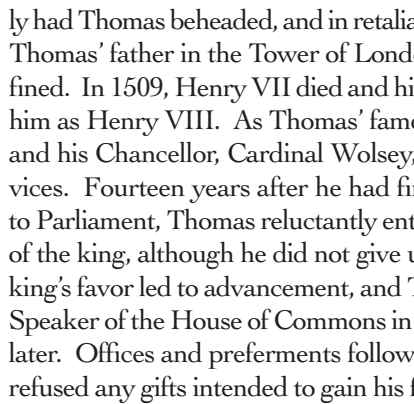
would be read, perhaps by one of the children, followed by discussion. Even though Thomas did not permit card or dice games, family time bubbled with merriment. The family and servants also prayed the Liturgy of the Hours at night.

During these years, Thomas became a great intellectual and leading figure of the European Renaissance, which focused on a recovery of Greek and Latin classics of literature, art, and architecture, as well as on "humanism," a religiously-neutral approach to pagan culture. His best-known work, *Utopia*, satirized his own society and described an ideal society that seemed so real that some believed it actually existed. One of his greatest friends was the Dutch priest and scholar Erasmus, whom he met while studying law. Although both remained loyal sons of the Church, they advocated reform in the Church, Erasmus in such a way that he was playing with fire, as he later acknowledged by saying that his defense of "liberty of spirit" had been twisted into "unbridled licensed of the flesh" and that he would never have written what he did if he had foreseen the Protestant revolt.

Unlike Erasmus, Thomas was a deeply religious man. He went to daily Mass and was conscious of the impact reception of the Eucharist made on his daily life, arming him for spiritual combat, enlightening him, and strengthening his prudence. Wary of the temptations to pride that education offered, he nevertheless thought that a life of scholarship was better suited to piety, charity, detachment, and gentleness than the rough-and-tumble of politics or the insidious culture of the royal court. He despised luxury and ostentation. The guests at his table were the learned and those in poverty, rather than the rich or members of the nobility. He watched out for the welfare of the poor; quietly seeking them out in alleys and obscure lanes, and whenever he learned of a woman in labor, he prayed intensely until she delivered her child. Unlike his intellectual contemporaries, he thought highly of asceticism. From the age of eighteen, he wore a hair shirt, which only his family knew, and on Fridays, he scourged himself.

The year before his first marriage, at age twenty-six, Thomas was elected to the English Parliament. He immediately began opposing certain taxes of King Henry VII. Partly as a result of his leadership, the king had to back down. He was so angry that he near-





ly had Thomas beheaded, and in retaliation imprisoned Thomas' father in the Tower of London and had him fined. In 1509, Henry VII died and his son succeeded him as Henry VIII. As Thomas' fame grew, the king and his Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, sought his services. Fourteen years after he had first been elected to Parliament, Thomas reluctantly entered the service of the king, although he did not give up his seat. The king's favor led to advancement, and Thomas became Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523, five years later. Offices and preferments followed, although he refused any gifts intended to gain his favor.

These were years of friendship with the king. Thomas often dined with the king and Queen Catherine, and late-night discussions were frequent. Thomas detested always being at the king's beck and call, and tried to distance himself somewhat from his intense, overwhelming monarch, even trying to make himself less likable. One surprising result was the king inviting himself to Thomas' home for dinner, so that he might enjoy Thomas' company. In these years, both men were outspoken in their defense of the true faith, so much so that the Pope conferred on the king the title "Defender of the Faith" and Thomas began writing treatises against heresy.

Yet these were also years when trouble was brewing. The king had one child, a daughter Mary, to succeed him. This had not been a problem until he developed a consuming infatuation for Anne Boleyn and decided that his marriage to Queen Catherine should be annulled, on the grounds that he should not have received a dispensation to marry his brother's widow. Cardinal Wolsey applied to the Pope for an annulment, but as the years dragged on and it was not granted, the king removed him from his office and in 1529 replaced him with Thomas, the first layman ever to hold the position of Chancellor. In this capacity, Thomas acted less as a political advisor than as a courtroom judge, a task he fulfilled with great efficiency. He especially focused on finding ways to avoid executing heretics.

Thomas strongly believed in the indissolubility of marriage, but he at first avoided the controversy. However, in 1531, the king required all of England's clergy to acknowledge him "Protector and Supreme Head of the Church of England as far as allowed by the law of Christ." Thomas tried to resign the chancellorship, but the king refused. The next year, the king forbade the clergy to prosecute heretics or to meet without his permission. Parliament also introduced a bill to forbid the bishops from sending money to Rome. Thomas opposed all three of these moves, angering the king. The next year, all of England's bishops but St. John

Fisher submitted to the king. Thomas resigned the day after, having been chancellor two and a half years. In early 1533, the king "married" Anne Boleyn, some months before his now-submissive clergy declared his marriage to Catherine null and void.

Thomas' resignation reduced him to near poverty, but he told his family that, if they had to go begging, they'd do it together, merrily. He remained eighteen months in seclusion. In 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Succession, declaring that the king's daughter Elizabeth, born the previous September, was the legitimate heir to the throne; that his marriage to Catherine had not been a true marriage; repudiating the authority of any foreign prince or potentate — that is, the Pope; and making opposition high treason. (A week later, the Pope issued a final disapproval of the king's annulment.) Everyone was required to swear an oath acknowledging the king as head of the Church of England. Thomas refused, and two weeks later he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

For months, Thomas' family begged him to take the oath. He refused, but neither did he speak against the king. The finest of his spiritual works, *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, was written during the fifteen months he was imprisoned, as was the unfinished *Treatise on the Passion*. He remained cheerful and joked with visitors. Six months into imprisonment, his lands were taken and his family left penniless. His silence came to be interpreted as treason, and he was eventually forbidden visitors, books, and writing materials. A few months later, an Act of Supremacy gave the title of "only supreme head of the Church of England" to the king and decreed that it was treason to deny it. When asked his opinion of the Act, he said nothing.

During the last weeks of his imprisonment, Thomas witnessed martyrdoms, and feared that he could not measure up to the cheerfulness with which these men went to their deaths. He felt unworthy and weak. Nevertheless, he expressed trust in God's merciful goodness. Ill from a "disease of chest" and kidney stones, he was condemned to death on the basis of perjured testimony. After sentencing, he stated his belief that no king should be head of the Church. Less than a week later, dressed in his best clothes, he went to his martyrdom. He prayed for the king, prayed Psalm 51, kissed his executioner, and declared: "I have ever been the king's good and loyal servant — but God's first."

Thomas answered the call to give his life to God while living in the world. In the ordinary events of everyday life, in his role as husband and father, and in his position as Lord Chancellor of England he was faithful, above all else, to God.