



Portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger

St. Thomas More

- τ The most highly respected men of his time
 - ✘ Successful barrister
 - ✘ An honest judge
 - ✘ A scholar
 - ✘ Attained the highest status of any commoner in England, appointed by Henry VIII to the office of Lord Chancellor
 - ✘ A Secular Franciscan (believed to be)

- τ A bit of biography
 - ✘ Born in London on February 7, 1478
 - ✘ Died in London on July 6, 1535 (age 57)
 - † Life expectancy at that time was about 40 years
 - ⚡ Not necessarily accurate due to high infant mortality rate
 - ✘ Father (Sir John More) was a judge in London
 - ✘ Educated at St. Anthony's School, London and Oxford University
 - † A classical education – Latin and Greek
 - ✘ Considered becoming a monk (Carthusian)
 - † Continued with prayer, fasting and penance for the rest of his life – hair shirt (Leonard)
 - ✘ Read the law at Lincoln's Inn of the Inns of Court in London
 - ✘ Married, widowed and remarried
 - † Four children
 - ✘ Elected to Parliament at the age of 26
 - ✘ Worked his way up the political ladder of the day

- † Named Lord Chancellor by Henry VII (1529)
- ✘ Had a slight falling out with Henry VII and Cardinal Wolsey (his predecessor as Chancellor)
 - † Refused to sign the oath of supremacy of the Crown (the King) over the Church in England (which became the Church of England)
 - ✦ Henry declared himself head of the Church in England and broke from Rome
 - ✦ John Fisher (Bishop, Cardinal, friend of Thomas, Defender of Catherine of Aragon) also refused to sign the oath and suffered the same fate as More
 - ✦ Confiscation of Church property
 - † Refused the “spiritual validity” of Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn or attend the coronation of Queen Anne
- ✘ Resigned his post as Lord Chancellor
 - † Retired and tried to remain anonymous
 - † His silence was deafening
- ✘ Charged with “high treason,” tried and convicted
 - † Trumped up charges
 - † Presented legal defense
 - ✦ Cited legal axiom (*one who keeps silent seems to consent*) and that the Statue of Supremacy (Henry’s new law) was contrary to the *Magna Carta*
 - † The jury, which included, among others, Anne Boleyn’s father, brother and uncle, convicted him and sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered.
 - ✦ Henry, in his benevolence, commuted the sentence to mere decapitation
- ✘ Beatified in 1886 by Leo XIII
- ✘ Canonized in 1935 by Pius XI
 - † Patron saint of lawyers, politicians and statesmen

τ Some historical context

- ✘ The population of London in 1500 was about 60,000
 - † A little larger geography than what we know today as the City of London
 - ✦ No sewer system
 - ✦ No running water
 - ✦ No paved streets
 - † Literacy rate was about 15%
 - ✦ London had grammar schools for the very rich
 - ✦ Oxford University had been around for 500 years, more or less

- ✧ There were around 70 universities in Europe at that time
 - Bologna
 - Paris
 - Uppsala
 - ✧ Some people and events you may know
 - † Erasmus (1466-1536) was a contemporary and close friend of More – Christian Humanist
 - † The philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was prominent (dominant?) in the Church
 - ◆ *Summa Theologica*
 - † The printing press had been around for about 60 years
 - ◆ Had produced 20 million books by 1500
 - † Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his 95 points on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg in 1517
 - † Columbus discovered America in 1492
 - ✧ I wanted to report on Pope Alexander VI, but Peter made me change to a more saintly Secular Franciscan
 - † You may know him better as Rodrigo Borgia, father of Lucretia Borgia
 - † His reign as pope (1492-1503) was a bit dicey
 - ◆ Rampant nepotism
 - ◆ All the abuses that Martin Luther spoke out against
 - ◆ Reigned over a debased Curia
 - † Only 20 years before Clement VII refused Henry VIII annulment
- τ Why is Thomas More important?
 - ✧ Demonstrated honesty and scholarship at a time when both were rare
 - † Defined Christian humanism as a combination of reason and faith
 - † As opposed to secular humanism – the Age of Reason
 - ✧ Was an ardent Defender of the Faith against Protestantism
 - † Worked to prevent publication of Protestant books in England
 - ✧ He wrote *Utopia* (published in 1515)
 - † Again, some context
 - ◆ 300 years after St. Francis (Reformer within the Church)
 - ◆ Catholic Church was fundamentally unchallenged for more than 1000 years
 - ✧ Rumblings of revolt were in the air

✳ Martin Luther (Reformer outside the Church) – Protestant Reformation

† An allegorical tale of two books

✧ Book One – *Dialogue of Council*

✳ A trip through the Low Countries with Peter Giles

✳ Critical of the hypocrisy of the Church at the time

✧ Book Two – *Discourse on Utopia*

✳ It is a fundamental disposition of humankind to concoct imaginary Utopias

✳ Rebuild the Church with an ideal

τ *A Man For All Seasons*

✳ A great play and movie (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor Oscars in 1965)

✳ There are at least three quotes that show the character of More

† All are verified by serious biographers – the third is verbatim and the other two are true to the concept presented

† First, his respect for the law, in answer to his son-in-law's demand that More arrest Richard Rich:

And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast- man's laws, not God's- and if you cut them down-and you're just the man to do it-do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake.

† Second, his view of the obligations of public office:

When statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties, they lead their country by a short route to chaos.

† Third, his priorities when he was about to be beheaded:

I am commanded by the king to be brief, and since I am the king's obedient subject, brief I will be. I die His Majesty's good servant, but God's first.

τ For your consideration:

✳ What is your relationship to the law of the land? Are civil laws necessary? Should we obey them?

✳ As a member of a community (you pick which one), how should your private conscience influence your behavior?

✳ How can you act in such a way that you are first and foremost God's "good servant?"