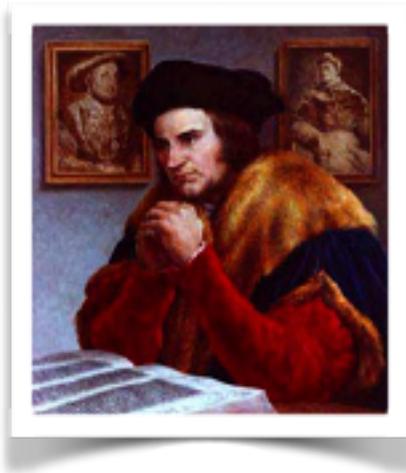


St. Thomas More **“A Man for all seasons”**



A Reflection and Homily by Former Pastor Kenneth White. **Given on June 22, 2008 The Feast of St. Thomas More**

Today we celebrate the feast of our patron saint, St. Thomas More, who lived from 1478 - 1535. Thomas More lived in an age as exciting and revolutionary as our own. We sometimes say we live in the “information age” because of computers and the internet. Well, Thomas More lived just decades after the printing press introduced the first information age. Vast new philosophical and scientific classical book written in Greek were re-introduced into Europe through the Arab world.

Thomas More was 14 when Christopher Columbus founded the new world. It was not unlike the Americans landing on the moon in 1968. The Great nation states of England, France, Germany, and Netherlands and Spain became competitive for commerce and new lands. When Thomas More turned 39 an Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, launched the Protestant Reformation. The old medieval world had died and a new secular scientific nation state world was emerging.

Sir Thomas More was born in 1478 with a silver spoon in his mouth. His dad was a judge and at an early age, Thomas More became a page in the household of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was his early training in court life.

As a young man he was introduced to classic Greek and Latin works and was fluent in those languages. From age 23 to 27 as he pursued legal studies he also lived with the Carthusian monks and joined them in their daily prayers.

But Thomas knew his vocation was not to be a monk, although for the rest of his life he led his family in daily devotions and wore an inner hair shirt as penance. When he was 28 he married a much younger Jane Colt. They had four children: Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily and John. Tragically Jane died after only 6 years of marriage and Thomas was a widower at age 34 with four children under the age of 5.

Knowing his children needed a mother, within a month of Jane's death, he married Alice Middleton who was wealthy, attractive, and fashion-conscious. Alice tried to smarten up Thomas More's appearance and to humanize his monkish rigorous order of the household. Thomas More looked after the education of his four children and contrary to the times he assured that his daughters received the best education. In fact his oldest daughter, Margaret, grew up to become one of the most learned women of her day.

Thomas More wrote many works in Greek, Latin and English, including his famous work *Utopia* which describes an ideal society. He went to France and the Flanders to negotiate treaties, became a member of the King's Council and was the Elected Speaker of the house of Commons. In 1529, at age 51, Henry VIII named Thomas More to be Lord Chancellor of England.

We all know the story of King Henry VIII and his many wives and his desperate quest for a son to be the heir to the throne. He had no male heir and he had fallen in love with Anne Boleyn. However, the Catholic Church would not invalidate his previous marriage. So King Henry VIII broke his ties with the Catholic Church and declared himself head of the Church of England.

In 1532 the Convocation of Clergy submitted to Henry's authority as Supreme Head. Only John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and Thomas More did not submit. In 1534 Thomas was summoned to Lambeth Palace to swear an oath of allegiance to the new Act of Succession acknowledging Anne as rightful Queen and Henry head of the Church of England.

The King's Council considered More's refusal of the oath to be merely a foolish scruple. Many of his political friends urged Thomas to "trim his conscience" to political reality, and save them all the embarrassment. After his imprisonment in the Tower of London, even his wife, Alice, and his daughter, Margaret, pleaded with him to sign the Oath of Succession.

Thomas More was to spend over a year imprisonment in the Tower. There in the dark, cold and damp stone chamber he wrestled with his fate. Just months before his execution he wrote in Latin his last work: *On the Sadness, Weariness, Fear, and Prayer of Christ Before His Passion*.

We can imagine More meditating on Jesus in the garden, praying in the darkness in Agony; the apostles were sleeping. During those hours Jesus fought and won the battle. Would not you and I be tempted to simply sign the oath, knowing that we fought the good fight and people would know that it was just a piece of paper?

Surely, Thomas More prayed the words of Jesus "Father, let this cup pass me by!" But ultimately he surrendered to God: "Father, let it be done according to your will, not mine."

Thomas More was formally indicted for treason and appeared on trial at Westminster Hall on July 1, 1535. He was condemned to death, and was sentenced was "mercifully" commuted to beheading. It was carried out on July 6, 1535 on Tower Green. He died as he lived: "I die as the King's loyal servant, but God's servant first."

In 1960, Robert Bolt wrote a play on the life of Thomas More called "A Man for All Seasons." In 1966 the movie was the winner of 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture. You should rent

this movie as it is not at all dated with the superb acting of stars such as Paul Scofield, Orson Wells and Vanessa Redgrave.

I would like to make a final important point about the play and movie. When we, contemporary people, watch this play or see this movie we interpret Thomas More's life in terms of human rights and the freedom of the individual conscience. We identify with an individual holding out against the power of a tyrant.

But Thomas More did not view this issue as "individual rights," but More saw himself as "in the hands" of God. For Thomas it was not his decision, but God's will for him. Clearly he said and lived out the words of Jesus at Gethsemane: "Father, let it be done according to your will, not mine!"

Thomas More challenges us as we live in a "culture of selfhood." Our culture tells us that we are beholden to no one including God. Our culture tells us that we are free to decide what is true and what is not true. Our culture is rightly called the "Culture of the Imperial Self."

Would that we would live according to God's will and not our own, so that with our last breath we could pray "I die as God's loyal servant!"