

## BLESSED THOMAS MORE

### HIS MARTYRDOM

He must die before nine o'clock. So the message had come to Sir Thomas More early on the morning of July 6, A.D. 1535. Without shrinking or dismay, but the rather with gladness of heart, was the summons received (writes Mr. Joseph Clayton in the *London Universe*).

He had not sought death; neither had he judged the conscience of others, nor meddled with any who made submission to the King when the new claims were set up and the old obedience to the Papacy forbidden.

Only for Sir Thomas More, as for his friends the Carthusians, and for Blessed John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, such submission was impossible. The King had taken his way, the way of the flesh, and Sir Thomas More must go his way, the way of the spirit. The old friendship of Henry for his Chancellor was broken two years before, when Henry had made Anne Boleyn his wife, with the sanction of Archbishop Cramer, and in spite of the refusal of Rome to annul the marriage with Catherine. The Chancellor had resigned the Great Seal, 'seeing that affairs were going badly, and likely to be worse, and that if he retained his office he would be obliged to act against his conscience, or incur the King's displeasure, as he had already begun to do, for refusing to take his part against the clergy.' The displeasure deepened when Sir Thomas More declined to be present at Anne Boleyn's Coronation—holding that his presence would signify his approval of the divorce from Queen Catherine.

The Act of Succession making Elizabeth, Anne's child, heir to the throne, and passing over Mary, was another matter, and to this More could assent. The English Parliament could lawfully decide who should wear the Crown of England. But it was not for Parliament to deny the allegiance of English Church-folks to the Holy Father at Rome, and set up a new supremacy over the Catholic Church in England. That point was clear to Sir Thomas More, and no oath admitting such supremacy could he, would he, take.

For fifteen months he lay a prisoner in the Tower, and then, on July 1, was Sir Thomas More brought to trial on the charge of treason, of having refused the King 'maliciously, falsely, and traitorously, his title of supreme head of the Church of England.' He pleaded that he had but kept silence, and that neither statutes nor laws could condemn people for keeping silence. This very silent disapproval had brought the anger of the King, and only when the jury had declared him guilty of death, and sentence had been pronounced, did Sir Thomas More state calmly that for seven years he had studied the matter, and could not find that supremacy in a Church that belonged to a layman, or to any but the See of Rome, as granted personally by our Lord when on earth to St. Peter and his successors.

To the Duke of Norfolk's taunting question, whether he wished to be considered wiser and better than all the bishops and nobles of the realm who had sworn to the King's supremacy, More answered with a touch of high scorn, 'For one bishop of your opinion, my lord, I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one Parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for a thousand years.' On this the Duke of Norfolk said that now his malice was clear.

Never was man freer from malice than was this great-hearted, clear-headed Englishman, Blessed Thomas More. Liberty of conscience was dear to him, the unity of Christendom was dear to him, and he could not conceive that it was possible to remain a Catholic and at the same time to repudiate the very centre of the Catholic Church, and deny the headship of Rome. Yet he has no word of blame for the thousands of clergy and laity who fell away before the strong self-will of Henry VIII., and weakly yielded to the storm.

Henry had been his friend. They had taken sweet counsel together. And now, because of Henry's evil passion for Anne Boleyn, Sir Thomas More had lain in

the Tower more than twelve weary months, his property had been seized, and his death decreed. Yet he utters no reproach. Nay, on the very morning of his martyrdom, he thanked the King's messenger: 'And so, God help me, am I bounden to his Highness most of all, that it pleaseth him so shortly to rid me from the miseries of this wretched world; and therefore will I not fail earnestly to pray for his Grace both here and also in the world to come.'

With serene good humor he went to his death. Always had Sir Thomas More loved the Mass. He had been wont to serve the priest at his parish church, and in the long imprisonment in the Tower he had meditated much on the love of God. In early manhood he had written:—

'Thus should of God the lover be content  
Any distress or sorrow to endure,  
Rather than be from God his love absent,  
And glad to die, so that he may be sure,  
By his departing hence for to procure  
After this valley dark the heavenly light,  
And of His love the glorious blessed sight.'

And now that the time had come to die he went gladly to his death.

He had given his blessing to his well-loved daughter, Margaret Roper, and her husband, and to his son, John More, and had written his last letters. The King had commuted the shameful sentence of drawing, hanging, mutilating, and quartering at Tyburn to simple execution on Tower Hill. It was but a step to the scaffold.

'I pray thee see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself,' said the martyr to the Lieutenant of the Tower; for the scaffold was unsteady.

Then he turned to the people, and desired them all to pray for him and to bear witness with him that he suffered death in and for the faith of the Catholic Church. He bade them pray also for the King, that God would send him good counsel, and said that he died the King's faithful servant, only still more the servant of God.

Kneeling down, he recited the *Miserere*, his favorite psalm; and when the executioner asked his pardon, More kissed him, and with all his old cheerfulness said: 'Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thy office. My neck is very short; take heed, therefore, thou strike not awry for saving of thine honesty.'

He blindfolded himself, and, lying full length on the scaffold (for the block was a mere log), with his face downwards, the axe fell, and the martyr's crown was won.

It was the eve of the Translation of St. Thomas of Canterbury, as Blessed Thomas More had noted. And as surely as St. Thomas of Canterbury had died a martyr in the twelfth century, so died Sir Thomas More in the year 1535.

Three hundred and fifty years later, A.D. 1887, Pope Leo XIII. decreed his beatification. And to-day we ask the prayers of Blessed Thomas More for the conversion of the land he loved and served so well.

At a recent meeting of the Australian Catholic Federation in the Cathedral Hall, Melbourne, it was decided that the correspondence in the controversy with the Grand Master of the Orange Society be printed in pamphlet form, and circulated to the extent of 100,000 all over Australia. The Federation is still making good progress, in opening up branches. There are now in existence 86 parish councils and 226 district sub-committees, making in all 312 branches in Victoria. As recommended by the Immigrant Aid Sub-Committee, Mr. N. J. Walsh was appointed representative of the federation in rendering assistance to Catholic immigrants. His duties will be to keep a register of the names of Catholic immigrants, locality of birth, residence before arrival and destination, and to supply information relative to lands, and where employment is to be obtained. The headquarters will be known as the Catholic Immigrant Aid Bureau, Flinders Buildings, Flinders street, Melbourne.