

Saint of the Month for June 2013

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Thomas More, Martyr
Saturday, June 22

St. Thomas More lived during a turbulent era in European history, which included the rise of Protestantism with Martin Luther and many others, and the formation of the Church of England under Henry VIII.

Thomas was born on February 7, 1477 in London to an English lawyer who became a judge, and his first wife, Agnes Grainger. Thomas was educated at St. Anthony's school in Threadneedle Street, perhaps the best school in the City. (You might know this street, as it is the location of the Bank of England, the "Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.") Later he attended Oxford University for about two years, but was called back to London around 1494 by his father to pursue legal studies at Lincoln's Inn, one of the four principal legal societies in London. He became a barrister in 1501.

Thomas was married twice and had four children by birth and several others by adoption. His first marriage was to Jane Colt in 1504 or 1505: he was supposed to be more interested in her younger sister, but felt it incumbent to marry the eldest. (Sounds a bit like the Genesis story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel!) Nevertheless, they seemed to have lived a happy life, and had three daughters and one son. Jane died (maybe in childbirth), and Thomas married again in a few weeks, which caused some controversy. However, he was quite aware that he had four young children and needed help and companionship. His second wife was Alice Middleton, a widow and the daughter of a London mercer (a dealer in textiles). Alice had some children in her first marriage, but none with Thomas.

St. Thomas was quite devout his entire life, combining his legal work with prayer, sacred reading, and penance. Earlier in life More considered becoming a priest, and lived for about four years in the Carthusian monastery adjoining Lincoln's Inn. He was also attracted to the Franciscan order, but decided he would best serve God and his fellows as a lay Christian. He was greatly in favor of education for girls, and seems to have had a Christian academy for his children and some others, mostly girls.

His legal work led to trade negotiations involving England and the Low Countries as well as England and France, and he was drawn into court circles, though not entirely willingly. He rose in rank and prestige, and, after the resignation of Thomas Wolsey, a Cardinal, became the Lord Chancellor of England in 1529 and became Sir Thomas More.

St. Thomas was a very learned man himself, and in close contact with the leading lights of his day, including Erasmus, who visited him at least three times. St. Thomas wrote many works including those defending the Church against various heresies. Perhaps his best known work is **Utopia**, a speculative political book about government, virtue, and many other things; it is a work of fiction set on an island off the coast of the New World, and the title can be translated from Greek as **Nowhere**.

St. Thomas ran into difficulties with King Henry VIII that eventually cost him his life: he refused to approve of the divorce of Henry from Catherine of Aragon, his first wife, and

refused to accept the King's claim that he was the supreme head of the Church in England.

On the first point, a pope had permitted Henry to marry Catherine "for state reasons," although this would not have been allowed in general, as she had been married to Henry's late brother. Wolsey and others had tried to secure a divorce, which Henry wanted because Catherine had had no male children, but the pope refused, and Thomas held on to the belief that this marriage had been valid. Henry divorced Catherine and married Anne Boleyn, but Thomas refused to attend her coronation, which increased Henry's anger. Many people, both clergy and lay, accepted Henry's claim on the second point and signed documents to that effect, but Thomas refused to sign.

St. Thomas tried to avoid further conflict by saying nothing in public and in 1532 resigning his office of Lord Chancellor, which put him and his family into poverty. (His honesty as a lawyer and judge had precluded his taking bribes, as had so many of his contemporaries.) Nonetheless, he was relentlessly pursued by the King's agents, especially Thomas Cromwell (effectively the head of government), and Thomas spent several years in the Tower of London. During this time he was questioned repeatedly, but would not sign the essential papers; some of his relatives also urged him to sign, and he had great anguish over their entreaties.

Eventually his time ran out, he underwent a rigged trial on July 1, 1535 and was condemned to death. His initial sentence (the traitor's death) was to be hanged, drawn, and quartered, but the King changed this to beheading. He was executed on July 6, 1535 on Tower Hill, London, telling the onlookers to witness that he was dying "in the faith and for the faith of the Catholic Church, the king's good servant but God's first."

The church celebrates his memory along with St. John Fisher, who was the Bishop of Rochester, England; both were executed in 1535.

He was beatified in 1886 and canonized in 1935.

This year there are multiple commemorations possible on June 22 (listed by me in no particular order):

- Saturday of the 11th Week in Ordinary Time
- St. Paulinus of Nola, Bishop
- Optional Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary
- Saints John Fisher, Bishop, and Thomas More, Martyrs

I have chosen just one of these saints.

The last commemoration listed is given the rank of Optional Memorial, and is usually celebrated on those saints' day, June 22 now, but July 9 in earlier times. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); Butler's **Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Encyclopædia Britannica, 15th edition**; **Magnificat**, June 2013)

Collect from the Mass of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More:

O God, who in martyrdom
have brought true faith to its highest expression,
graciously grant

that, strengthened through the intercession
of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More,
we may confirm by the witness of our life
the faith we profess with our lips.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

We are not all scholars and writers of his stature, nor are we so well-connected, but we can be more aware of the persecutions that many have endured against their faith and their principles. In this case, that faith was more important than life itself. Saint Thomas More, pray for us!

You might have seen the movie *A Man for All Seasons* about the last years of More's life. There have been at least two versions- the one I have watched many times stars Paul Scofield as Thomas; Wendy Hiller as Alice; Susannah York as Margaret, More's daughter; Leo McKern as Thomas Cromwell; and Robert Shaw as King Henry. It was based on a play of the same name by Robert Bolt, which I have also read many times.

The story did not end with St. Thomas More's death. In later years Thomas Cromwell was also executed, as was Anne Boleyn and many others. At least one duke was scheduled to die, but was saved by Henry's death the day before, and so no one could sign the death warrant.