

THE LAYFOLK'S PATRON SAINT*

THE Catholic layman should glory in the name of Catholic. It is no accident that, of the four marks of the true Church, Catholicity is the character that has prevailed. We are called Catholics, because the note of Catholicity in a sense contains and implies the others. Catholicity means unity diffused, spread abroad—unity everywhere. Unity absolutely demands a Hierarchy, oneness with the Apostolic tradition. Holiness means unity of belief and practice; the integral, personal unity of one who has perfectly harmonized faith and morals, whose life is the expression of his convictions of the one and only truth. Catholicity, therefore, means unity, vital and organized, unity magnificent, unity transcendent. Catholicity is the stupendous, resplendent unity of past and present, of all ages stretching out into the eternal years. The Catholic is one with Christ and one with all with whom Christ is one. The Catholic is the totalitarian Christian.

This totalitarian mark is conspicuous in the lives of the Church's martyrs whose eminent charity led them to the last limit of self-sacrifice: their heroic constancy makes them one with the King of martyrs with Whom they are identified even to the shedding of their blood.

Just over four hundred years ago two men went to the scaffold on Tower Hill and laid down their lives for the same cause—St. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church; and St. Thomas More, Knight, and one time Lord Chancellor of England.

A martyr is one who in a supreme way witnesses to the supreme truth. There are different ways of bearing witness to the truth. Our English martyrs have died in different ways and for different causes; but always for some

* The substance of an address given in the Church of the Holy Redeemer, Chelsea.

article of the Catholic faith. Some have died for the Mass: some for the priesthood. These two martyrs, so recently canonized, died for the Kingship of Christ and the spiritual supremacy of Christ's earthly vicar, the Pope. Henry the Eighth's home-made and self-imposed title of 'only supreme Head in earth of the Church in England' they refused to accept; and, under the Treasons Act, they were tried and sentenced to death.

They were not disloyal or disobedient to the king. Like all good Catholics who are true to their faith, they gave their ready and willing submission to the power that rules. Loyalty in a Catholic heart is part of the obedience due to God. All power is from God. 'By me, saith the Lord, kings reign and princes decree justice.'

For the Catholic, civil allegiance is part of his religious allegiance. There is but one true allegiance: one obedience, even as there is but one God. There is only divided allegiance and a clash of loyalties where either ruler or people refuse to acknowledge the supreme will of God, who is the King of kings and the Ruler of the nations.

John Fisher and Thomas More, like good Catholics, gave their dutiful allegiance to their sovereign, who had the right to their obedience in the civil and temporal spheres. Yet they were charged with disloyalty and the indictment against them was that of high treason.

The martyrs were not refusing to give the king something that was his due; but the King was demanding what he had no right to ask, something that it would be sinful for Catholics to give. They must obey him within the limits of his authority. They must disobey him when he asks them to disobey God. There would be no conflict of authorities, no divided allegiance if the rights of God were respected and the Kingship of Christ honoured. Catholics cannot obey when the King says: 'Bow down and obey me as the only authority in Church and State.'

It is no coincidence surely that, in an age which worships the state as supreme, even to the exclusion of God, we

should be asked to fix our eyes on Christ the King and to honour two new saints who died for the supremacy of the spiritual power and authority of the Vicar of Christ.

Christus Rex is set over against the false teaching of the totalitarian state; and an English Cardinal and an English Lord Chancellor are canonized as witnesses against the idolatrous worship of the state.

There should be a thrill in the heart of every citizen of this great city to be able to honour St. Thomas More—a canonized Londoner, born within the sound of Bow bells; and a canonized lawyer, the honest lawyer who never accepted a case in which he was not satisfied with the rights of his client, and who, whenever possible, tried to induce the disputing parties to come to terms out of court.

St. Thomas More is a fit patron for the English layman. He has all the attractive qualities for which the English character, at its best, is rightly valued; sanity, common-sense, love of fair-play, balance, moderation, humour and humanity—all these natural virtues, engrafted by religion and made sublime by his love of God. There are some saints who win our esteem and respect, but stir within us no thrill or warmth of affection. We place them reverently on that glorified shelf called a pedestal and worship them with formal correctitude from a safe distance. Our sense of awe places them remotely apart and aloof. They do not come home to us, as we say. We must put on our Sunday clothes and best manners to talk to them.

St. Thomas More was not one of these saints—awful and awe-inspiring. You could talk to him in your shirt-sleeves: he was a merry saint—if the phrase may pass, a jolly saint, one with whom we should have felt at our ease, with whom there would have been no need to be on our guard or afraid of shocking him. He was gentle, affable, genial, sociable, whimsical and humorous, delightfully human and kind; there was nothing extravagant or outlandish about him; he was saintly without being sanctimonious. He died an heroic lonely death, yet in so simple and matter-

of-fact a way; there was nothing theatrical, no posing; he remained serenely unconscious of his own greatness. No dramatic speech or spectacular gesture marked his supreme sacrifice, but only a smile and a jest on his lips.

His simple private Catholic life shows him to be a model of prayer and penance. He was rigidly ascetic in his self-denials and mortifications; an early riser, a hard worker. He worked strenuously as a lawyer and as the King's servant, and he toiled in defence of the faith. It has been said that he wrote more in defence of the faith than the combined output of all the clergy of his time, excepting perhaps his companion martyr St. John Fisher. In his home life, as father and husband, he gives to all his countrymen a glowing example of all the domestic virtues. As a young man he spent four years with the London Carthusians, living as a layman, studying, and joining in the prayers of the monks. He turned his thoughts at one time to the priesthood and the monastic life, but, in his humility and out of high esteem for the sacred order, he judged himself unequal and unworthy. So in his honest, sturdy goodness he remains the layman's patron saint. As his wife said of him, no one could get cross with so cheerful a husband.

He was twice happily married. The visitor to Chelsea old church may read the epitaph he composed for his second wife. He testifies to her great devotion to his children and says he cannot make up his mind which of his two wives was dearer to him. Certainly the second seems to have been more of a nagger and to have given him more occasion for patience. She once scolded him for his lack of ambition and said he should push himself forward more. 'My mother used to say,' she told him, 'it is better to rule than to be ruled; and I warrant you I would not be so foolish as to be ruled when I might rule.'—'My good woman, you speak the truth,' answered her husband. 'I have never found you willing to be ruled yet.'

Thomas More was a Member of Parliament, Speaker of the House of Commons, Under-Sherriff of London, Lord Chancellor of England, yet he loved to serve Mass like a schoolboy; and he would sing in the parish choir though at the time he was first Minister of the King. The Duke of Norfolk once discovered him in cassock and surplice about to engage in these simple duties. 'What!' exclaimed the Duke, 'a parish clerk, my Lord Chancellor!' The saint riposted with a question: 'Do I dishonour the King in trying to honour God?'

In the good life of a good Catholic all good things are caught up into the life of the good God.

St. Thomas died rather than betray conscience and the sovereign rights of God. He would not lie to himself. As he himself said, he would not 'pin his soul to any man's back however holy and learned.' Yet he was not hard or obstinate by nature. Some men resist, because they are obdurate and stiff-necked by temperament: they thrive on opposition, these protesters and protestants by disposition. Thomas More was not of that sort: he was pliable, amiable, gentle; but there was a rock-foundation of strength in him: and truth was truth and God's authority must not be trodden upon. How easy and in a sense how natural for him to follow the obvious way of worldly wisdom and comfort—to give way to the persuasions of his wife who, in the matter of the oath, thought him an amiable crank carrying crankiness just a little bit too far. We can hear her saying: 'You fool! do you think you know better than the Bishops? Don't you see you have the King's favour? A word from you and your life is yours; but drop all these senseless scruples.' True, he had the King's favour; but, as he reminded his son-in-law, Roper: 'The King doth favour me more than any subject in his realm, yet I have no cause to be proud, for if my head would win him a castle in France, my head would go.'

The Duke of Norfolk came, like one of Job's counsellors, and reminded him of the old saying about the anger of the prince spelling death. 'It's only a matter of sooner or later,' answered the saint. 'I go to-day; you go to-morrow. Anyhow, we cannot expect to go to Heaven on feather-beds.'

He stood up for the authority of the pope when the pope's personal reputation did not stand high. Alexander VI, of unholy memory, was pope during Thomas More's early manhood; and he and John Fisher both realized the scandal and rottenness of the papal court at the time. Yet they strenuously upheld the legitimate authority of the papacy. Here was heroic loyalty. It was God and God's will they clung to. 'Stick to God upon pain of life,' was St. Thomas More's magnificent saying.

He was imprisoned for fifteen months, sick with a disease of the chest and the other ailments of a broken man, broken in body and dauntless in soul. Catholic laymen in search for Catholic literature should read those noble letters which Thomas More wrote to his daughter Margaret from his prison cell, often written with charcoal on scraps of paper, when the King ordered his writing material to be confiscated. He is careful not to judge others. He will not be drawn into argument about the oath. If others can take it with a good conscience, that is their affair. For himself to take it would be deadly sin against God deserving of eternal damnation. He knows his own weakness, and only asks for prayers that he may not fail or fall away. He forgives his enemies. He prays for the King. He is resigned to God's will. Here is the Catholic, the totalitarian Christian, the Saint. He shows all the marks of the true follower of Christ.

The trial takes place and Richard Rich, the Solicitor-General, brings forward his lying evidence. More defends himself skilfully. He was not putting himself forward as a martyr. He was no traitor; and treason they could not prove. He was the King's loyal servant, but God's first.

As to the evidence of Richard Rich he uttered these solemn words: 'If I were a man, my Lords, that did not regard an oath, I need not (as is well known) in this place at this time nor in this case stand as an accused person. And if this oath of yours, Mr. Rich, be true, then I pray that I may never see the face of God, which I would not say were it otherwise to win the whole world. In faith, Mr. Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than my own peril.'

In spite of Rich's perjury, the verdict was 'Guilty'; and sentence of death was pronounced by the Chancellor.

Then was St. Thomas free to deliver his soul and speak his mind. 'I am condemned and God knows how. For the discharge of my conscience I will now speak freely. For seven years I have studied the matter of the oath and I have never read in any approved book that a layman can be head of the church.' The Chancellor interrupted him: 'What! you wish to be considered wiser and of better conscience than all the bishops and nobles of the realm?' To this St. Thomas replied: 'My lord, for one bishop of your opinion 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; and for one kingdom I have France and all the kingdoms of Christendom.'

The sentence of hanging and mutilation was commuted to beheading as a favour by the king. When St. Thomas heard this, he said: 'God keep my friends from such favours. A man may very well lose his head and come to no harm.'

Macaulay described such trials as that of St. Thomas More as 'murder preceded by mummery,' and Lord Campbell has said: 'We must regard the murder of Sir Thomas More as the blackest crime that has ever been perpetrated in England under form of law.' Yet God can draw good out of evil. Thomas himself foresaw that his death and the cause for which he died was a protest against the break-up of Christendom which we see being worked out in blood

and misery in Europe to-day. We are spectators of the lengths to which idolatry of the state has gone in our time. Personal unity, national unity and international unity are lost things for which the world is seeking, alas, everywhere except where they are to be found. That supreme thing for which the martyrs died is ultimately the only hope of Europe and the world. Four hundred years ago Europe's greatest lawyer and brightest wit, the wise St. Thomas More, said on the scaffold: 'Pray for me and bear witness with me that I here suffer death in and for the faith of the holy Catholic Church.' That faith in which and for which he died is our precious possession. That faith unites us to the martyrs, to each other and to Christ. Allegiance to that faith is the one thing that can reunite the nations and bring us the peace of Christ in the reign of Christ for which we daily hope and pray.

BERNARD DELANY, O.P.