



More News

The Newsletter of the Thomas More Society of America

May 1997

On February 20, members of the Society gathered to hear **Father Charles Antonicelli's** "All the pinch is in the pain: Thomas More's Reflections on the Passion." In consideration of our Lenten season, Father Antonicelli offered his insight on More's thoughts on the passion during his imprisonment, when he struggled to accept his own imminent death. "What folly is it," More asked himself, "then for you to avoid the temporal death so as thereby to fall in peril of purchasing yourself eternal death"? While our chaplain's lecture illuminated More's reflections on his own quiet suffering, **Dr. Matthew DeCoursey's** March address, "Why Study? Thomas More on Education," brought us back to the worldly arena of Richard DeMolen's January address. Where Dr. DeMolen had focused on More's close attention to the education of his children, Dr. DeCoursey offered a scholarly overview of early modern educational and Humanist ideals, speaking to contemporary issues such as the relation between education and virtue and the problems of a democratic educational system. The complete text of Father Antonicelli's paper begins on page 3, while Dr. DeCoursey's work will be featured in the summer newsletter.

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Upcoming Events
- 2 Announcements
- 3 "All the pinch is in the pain: Thomas More's Reflections on the Passion" by Father Antonicelli
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Upcoming Events

☛ The Thomas More Society is pleased to announce that **Dr. Gerard B. Wegemer**, Professor of English at the University of Dallas, will be the speaker for the Society's **scholarship awards ceremony** on Tuesday, May 20, 5:00 p.m., at the University Club, 1135 16th Street, N.W.,

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Washington, D.C. - Professor Wegemer, whose address is entitled, "Thomas More: How He Prepared for Greatness," serves on the editorial board of *Moreana* and is the author of several books on Thomas More, including *Thomas More on Statesmanship* and *Thomas More: A Profile in Courage*, celebrated by *The Catholic Journal* as one of the best biographies published in 1995. You will find Joseph Crumlish's review of the latter below.

☛ The annual memorial mass in honor of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher will be held on Friday, June 20, at 12:10 p.m., at St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill. The Society's chaplain, Father Charles Antonicelli, will be the celebrant, and Father Thomas Sandi, currently the Education and Training Officer at Bolling Air Force Base, will read the homily. A light buffet luncheon will follow the mass.

☛ After the mass, a brief member's meeting will be held in order to address the proposed amendment to Section 6.01 of the Society's bylaws. No progress was made on the amendment at the meeting on February 20, 1997, due to the fact that a quorum was not present.

The Board of The Thomas More Society of America is pleased to welcome Mr. John Higgins as its President-Elect.

☛ The C. S. Lewis Institute will host its conference, **The Life and Thought of C. S. Lewis**, May 2-3, 1997, at The Falls Church, in Falls Church, VA. For more information, call the Institute at 703-914-5602, ext. 3102. Dr. Lyle Dorsett, author of *The Essential Lewis*, and Reverend Jerry Root, finishing his dissertation, "C. S. Lewis and the Problem of Evil," will speak at the conference.

☛ The Society for Utopian Studies is accepting proposals for papers and panels for its upcoming conference, October 16-19, 1997. Mail inquiries to Lyman Tower Sargent, Dept. of Political Science, University of Missouri, Saint Louis, MO 63121-4499. Fax 314/516-5268.

☛ **William Tyndale and the English Bible** can be seen at the Library of Congress from June 4 through September 6. The exhibit, now showing at the New York Public Library, celebrates Tyndale's life and the tragic irony of his works' contribution to the King James Bible. At the Library of Congress, you will see the two extant copies of Tyndale's New Testament.

☛ The **International Thomas More Conference** will be held at Maynooth College, near Dublin, August 9-16, 1998. Proposals are being accepted for the topic, "Thomas More in His Time: Renaissance Humanism and Renaissance Law." Participants will consider and discuss such issues as the humanist dimension of law and the compatibility of humanism and theocentric religion. For more information, see *Moreana* 33 (1996): 5-36.

☛ As you may know, congress may be considering changing the name of the current U. S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit Building to the Howard T. Markey Building, in order to recognize **The Honorable Howard T. Markey**. If you wish to support this effort, please write to The Honorable Henry John Hyde at the Capitol Building.

“All the pinch is in the pain:’ Thomas More’s Reflections on the Passion”

Reverend Charles Antonicelli

February 20, 1997

Let me say at the outset, I am not a More scholar. Moreover, I am not really a scholar at all. My purpose today is to consider with you Thomas’ reflections on the passion of our Lord in such way as to assist us during our Lenten pilgrimage. More than that, I cannot do. With the understanding that ‘less is more,’ my remarks shall be brief.

From his writings while imprisoned, Thomas makes clear that he is able to stand firm in his conviction and accept his fate precisely by contemplating the passion of Christ. Thomas was arrested on April 17, 1534 and beheaded on July 6, 1535. During that time he wrote three books and several letters and prayers. Two of the books, *A Treatise on the Passion* and *De Tristitia Christi*, or *The Sadness of Christ*, are theological reflections by Thomas on much more than the passion of Christ. They begin with the fall of the angels and end in the garden at Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested. While they offer a great insight into Thomas’ thought and even devotion on the subject of Christ’s passion, they are less personal and revealing than the third book penned by our saint as he waited to be put to death.

This third book, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, which was actually written between the time of the other two, gives greater insight into the depth of Thomas’ feeling and emotion, albeit from behind a mask. The book is written in the form of a dialogue between an uncle and his nephew in Christian Hungary on the eve of the Turkish invasion. Thomas uses this vehicle to play out the dialogue continually going on in his own mind as he prepared to die. Antony, the uncle, represents Thomas’ spiritual side and Vincent, the nephew, his worldly concerns.

Toward the end of the book, Antony asserts that since Jesus was not too proud to suffer the most shameful death possible, neither should His disciples be if it is required of them. Vincent responds that it is not the shame he is worried about, but the pain. He says,

In good faith, uncle, as for the shame, ye shall need to take no more pain, for I suppose surely that any man that hath reason in his head shall hold himself satisfied with this. But of truth, uncle, all the pinch is in the pain. For as for shame, I perceive well enough a man may with wisdom so master it that it shall nothing move him at all, so far that it is almost in every country become a common proverb that shame is as it is taken. But, by God, uncle, all the wisdom in this world can never so master pain but that pain will be painful, spite of all the wit in this world.

Antony reminds him that the physical pain incurred in being faithful to Christ is worth bearing to avoid the eternal pain of hell for denying him.

In the final chapter of the book, entitled “The consideration of the painful death of Christ is sufficient to make us content to suffer painful death for his sake,” Antony encourages Vincent to meditate on the passion of Christ in order to strengthen himself to suffer in a similar way. These passages are an example of Thomas’ soul-searching throughout the book. He finally convinces the reader, and himself, that meditating on how Jesus suffered and died is the best preparation for surrendering to a similar fate in his name. Antony concludes with an appeal to the theological virtues, especially showing charity to those who will kill them, saying,

And let us fence us with faith, and comfort us with hope, and smite the devil in the face with a firebrand of charity. For surely if we be of that tender, loving mind that our master was and not hate them that kill us but pity them and pray for them with sorrow for the peril that they work unto themselves, that fire of charity thrown in his face striketh the devil suddenly so blind that he cannot see where to fasten a stroke on us.

Vincent’s response reflects Thomas’ desire that his reflections on the passion be read by others so that they might find strength in adversity, too. He says, “to the intent that the more may take profit by you, I purpose, uncle, as my poor wit and learning will serve me, to put your good counsel in remembrance. And thus, praying God to give me and all other that shall read it the grace to follow your good counsel therein, I shall commit you to God.”

In his letters from prison, Thomas continually resists the temptation to act against his conscience to save his life. In one letter to his daughter, Margaret, Thomas, referring to the thought of his own death, says, “for the fear thereof, I thank our Lord, the fear of hell, the hope of heaven and the passion of Christ daily more and more alleviate.” The meditations and

prayers composed by Thomas while in prison assist him in accepting his imminent death. Some of these prayers have the character of a well-reasoned argument, and it appears that Thomas is trying to justify his stand not only to others but to himself. In one meditation, "On the Fear of Death," Thomas prays, "What folly is it then for you to avoid this temporal death so as thereby to fall in peril of purchasing yourself eternal death, and yet therewith not to escape your temporal death, but perhaps for a while only to delay your death."

Thomas' greatest reflection on the passion, however, comes not from any of his writings but from the way his own suffering and death imitate the passion of Christ. Not only does he write about the passion at great length while he is in prison, but he puts these words into action. The parallels between Thomas' martyrdom and Jesus' death are quite remarkable.

Throughout his entire life, Thomas was known to be an upright man and greatly respected by all. People flocked to him for advice and assistance, to hear his words and enjoy his company, much like people came out to hear Jesus when he was preaching and healing the sick. All this changed when Thomas insisted on remaining faithful to his conscience. And, one by one, all who had admired him before now thought him a fool except his family and closest friends, and even they did not understand him. They are like the disciples who, on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, acclaim Him as king, only to turn around and call for His crucifixion in an angry mob. The apostles, too, did not fully understand Jesus, to the point the Peter actually tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem to meet His certain end. Thomas' beloved daughter, Margaret, would do the same.

Thomas is unjustly accused of disloyalty to the king and, thereby, fomenting civil strife, reminiscent of the trumped-up charges against Christ in order to get the Roman authorities involved. Before his arrest, Thomas went off to pray at his parish church, receiving communion for the last time as a free man. He follows the example of Christ's agony in the garden, upon which Thomas would reflect at length while in prison. Thomas is finally arrested and cross-examined during his lengthy stay in the Tower, not knowing what sort of death he would suffer and when. The betrayal of Thomas at his trial by the lie of Richard Rich, thus sealing his fate, recalls the traitorous kiss of Judas in the garden. Like Christ, he remains silent when faced with accusations, until he can remain silent no longer. He delivers himself into the hands of his executioners expressing his love and prayers for them, from the king to the Tower guard, following the example of Christ's prayer from the cross encouraging forgiveness.

Throughout the entire ordeal Thomas displays heroic firmness of purpose and possesses a supernatural sense of peace. Like Christ, he knows what he must do and he does it. Father Marc'hadour, in his introduction to a collection of Thomas' letters and prayers from prison, comments,

During his fifteen months in the Tower, More was aged 57 to 58. Physically his autumn was short, and he was to die a worn old man. But his spiritual autumn was an unbroken glory. All passion spent, all sting and sharpness gone, nothing remained but the full array of what St. Paul lists as 'the fruit of the spirit': 'charity, joy, peace, patience. . . .' He seemed to have espoused the world because he had dodged none of its tasks. While he had reaped some of its rewards, he felt he had also picked up some of its dust and dirt, and was thankful to heaven and even to Henry, for wrenching him out other world: how cheerfully he forfeits it, and all his dear ones, 'for the winning of Christ'!

Thomas' example is an inspiration for each one of us, especially during this season of Lent, when we ponder, as he so often did, the supreme sacrifice of our Lord for our salvation. Our purpose here today is accomplished if we can appropriate something of Thomas' example in our own lives. In the words of Father Marc'hadour, "May he, a gentle persuasive advocate, teach us how to play all our cards and how to speak to God; shame us out of our mediocrity; help us towards the solution of problems not unlike those of his own day, and brace us for ordeals perhaps as frightening as those he faced and went through so bravely."

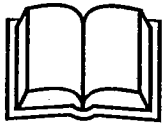
We look to the example of this saint, our friend, as an inspiration and a strength, and we make his prayer our own:

Lord, give me patience in tribulation
and grace in everything to conform
my will to thine, that I may truly say:

Fiat voluntas tua sicut in coelo et in terra.

The things, Good Lord, that I pray for
give me thy grace to labour for.





Book Review

Gerard B. Wegemer.

Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage.
Princeton, N. J.: Scepter Press,
1995, 307 pp., ISBN 0933932847,
\$24.95.

Gerry Wegemer's sympathetic but accurate new work tells the Thomas More story in a new and better way.

His little book is perfect both for newcomers to Thomas More and devotees as well. Pick any page and you find intriguing and enjoyable episodes in our sainted patron's life. The book is embellished with documentation, complete with map of old London, index, artwork (including photo of the bust Reed Armstrong cast for the Thomas More Society of America [TMS]), chronologies of his life and works, bibliography, footnotes and annotated pages from More's prayer book.

Wegemer puts to shame Richard Marius' *Thomas More*, which painted More as a sexually repressed hysteric. While Marius' 562 page opus seldom missed an opportunity to give an unedifying interpretation of his subject, Wegemer's 307 pages show sympathy and respect.

Dr. Wegemer, a product of Catholic schools and a professor of English at the University of Dallas, is of a new generation of More scholars, fascinated by this wonderfully witty medieval/Renaissance man who followed his conscience to his destiny at a major turning point in history.

TMS had the pleasure of hearing Professor Wegemer when he was still a student. The contrast with Harvard's Marius, who has twice addressed our society, is striking. Both systematically immerse us the details of the great man's life, his writings

and his times. But one understands what the other did not. Marius' Freudianism disparages what Wegemer champions-- Thomas More's spiritual life.

Wegemer sees More's faith as the integrating core of his being. Of his many virtues, Wegemer highlights courage, which C. S. Lewis denotes as "[t]he form of every virtue at the testing point . . . at the point of highest reality." More's Christian fortitude integrated his every characteristic and gave him balance, serenity and good cheer. Thus, his comic spirit, artful conversation, family devotion, loyalty to God and country, and his civil leadership helped him meet with equanimity his inexorable fate.

Exploring More is like exploring a universe. One sighting leads to another. More, the laughing statesman, turns out to have been also a poet and a creator of comic skits. (His son-in-law, Will Reper, reports that in his youth More was an "Improv" actor! As Cardinal Morton's page at Lambeth Palace, he would step in among players and, "never studying for the matter," make "a part of his own then presently among them.")

Training himself for "the real world," Thomas grew experienced in law, politics and administration as undersheriff of London. Then as Speaker of the House of Commons in one of the most revolutionary parliaments in English history, he made a lasting contribution to constitutional law by gaining the right of freedom of speech for parliament --a first in the history of modern government. A second great achievement was his defense of the medieval principle that the head of state is subject to law--especially to God's law--and that the power to rule comes from the consent of the governed.

Another contribution was when, as one of

the first lay diplomats, Thomas negotiated the peace of Cambrai, ending years of war with France.

His *History of King Richard III* is known to be the chief source of Shakespeare's great play. The theme was one which dominated More's life: that a tyrant takes control when lawyers/statesmen, blinded by self-interest, fail in their duty to oppose --a theme all too familiar to us postmoderns.

Elimination of tyranny was also the theme in More's amusingly provocative intellectual puzzle--*Utopia*. Thus even his literary classics were preparation for More's statesmanship.

It was through comedy, writes Wegemer, that More's intellectual abilities were manifested in a special way. Playful irony was the key to his artful way of engaging the hearts and minds of his contemporaries.

Shakespeare, in collaboration with others, dramatized More's quelling of a London riot in *Sir Thomas More*, presenting faithfully, in Wegemer's words, "those qualities for which More was best known: his quick wit, his commitment to justice, his unquestioned integrity, his compassion for and his deep understanding of the human heart."

More developed a courageous and artful way of expressing the truth as he saw it and challenging others to confront issues before the tribunal of conscience. According to Wegemer, "this fearless ability to test others in a pleasant and humorous manner gave him an unusual effectiveness."

But could he survive Henry's lust for power? More had, on the assurance that his conscience would be respected, reluctantly agreed to serve as the King's counsel, "[s]o far as I keep my place there as precariously as an unaccustomed rider in his saddle," he wrote.

Thomas entered deeper water when he accepted the arduous assignment as defender of Christendom against the powerful attacks of Martin Luther and William Tyndale. It was Tyndale who re-introduced the idea of the divine right of kings into England, giving Henry a new stick with which to beat the Pope in his fight to divorce Queen Catherine so that he could marry Anne Boleyn.

In refuting Tyndale, More encountered stormy seas. But confronting Christopher St. German, the King's most experienced and persuasive spokesman for statism, spelled shipwreck.

Thomas resigned as Lord Chancellor, hoping against hope that the foreseeable denouement of this royal drama would not take place. It did. Henry set up a commission to destroy his unruly courtier. Will Roper reports that Thomas, after meeting with the commission, was in high spirits. "The field is won," he said. What had he won? A reprieve? No. He had won his lifelong battle against his own weakness and the forces of evil.

"Do you wish to know, son Roper, why I was so merry?", he said. "In good faith, I rejoiced, . . . that I had given the devil a foul fall, and that with those lords I had gone so far, as without great shame I could never go back again."

Not until 1935, when Stalin and Hitler had silenced religion and spread statism, havoc and mayhem throughout the remains of Christendom, did Thomas emerge from an eclipse that had lasted four-hundred years. He and fellow martyr, Bishop John Fisher, lauded by Pius XI as "grand lighthouses set up to shine upon and enlighten in the ways of God," were canonized.

reviewed by Joseph D. Crumlish



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