

THE WITNESS OF ST JOHN FISHER & ST THOMAS MORE

“Nothing like it had ever been seen before in Christendom: a reigning king and queen standing before a court in a land they ruled, the king demanding an end to their marriage, the queen demanding its affirmation. All there present knew that the destiny of England hung on this moment; some guessed that the destiny of Christendom hung likewise. None could know that it also encompassed the destiny of four nations yet unborn, scattered far across the globe now being opened up by the Age of Discovery.”

Warren H Carroll¹

Marriage, and all it signifies, children raised in the stable and certain environment of a family with father as head and mother as heart, is irrefragibly the foundation of human society. Almighty God instituted marriage as an indissoluble union at the beginning of creation. When He came on earth as our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, He so confirmed it in the sacrament of Matrimony.

In a remarkable replication of the circumstances surrounding the execution of St John the Baptist, two saints died in defence of that institution and sacrament in the sixteenth century, Bishop John Fisher of Rochester and Sir Thomas More, former judge and Chancellor. Just as with the Baptist their deaths were precipitated by a woman, and as with the Baptist, the agent was a king. And again, as with the Baptist—in More’s case at least—the king was ashamed at his weakness and remorseful over his actions.

In Blackfriars, London, in June 1528, Bishop Fisher stood beside Queen Catherine as her counsel at a hearing before a legatine tribunal comprised of Lorenzo Cardinal Campeggio and Thomas Cardinal Wolsey in the presence of all the English bishops to consider the validity of her marriage with Henry. The hearing had been precipitated by Henry’s importunate demands for the issue to be tried as he sought to justify his desire to rid himself of his wife and replace her with Anne Boleyn. The Queen addressed her plea not to the tribunal, but to her husband, on her knees. He answered her not a word, and she left. On June 22nd Bishop Fisher addressed this submission to the tribunal on her behalf:

“I know that God is truth itself, nor he never spake but truth, which said, What God hath joined together let not man put asunder. And forasmuch as this marriage was made and joined by God to a good intent, I say that I know the truth the which cannot be broken or loosed by the power of man upon no feigned occasion.”

Six years later to the day, on evidence extracted from him with a lie by the Solicitor General, Sir Richard Rich, Bishop Fisher was beheaded after conviction for treason under the *Treasons Act* (1534: 26 Henry VIII, c. 13) which purported to give force to the

¹ Warren H Carroll, *The Cleaving of Christendom*, (A History of Christendom, Volume 4), Front Royal, 2000, p. 122.

Act of Supremacy (1534: 26 Henry VIII, c. 1) which had declared Henry VIII “the Only Head of the Church of England on earth”. Fisher told Rich plainly that the king “was not, nor could be, by the law of God, supreme head of the Church in England.” That, of course, was the truth, and the contriving of his death, an act of tyranny.

Sir Thomas More was condemned to death because of an alleged breach of the same Act. But More was a lawyer and Rich was unable to trick him, as he had tricked the holy Bishop. Having failed with trickery, Rich had to resort to perjury.

After his condemnation More rose to justify himself—

“Seeing that... ye are determined to condemn me (God knoweth how) I will now in discharge of my conscience speak my mind plainly and freely touching my indictment and your Statute withal. And forasmuch as this indictment is grounded upon an Act of Parliament directly repugnant to the laws of God and his holy Church, the supreme government of which, or of any part whereof, may no temporal prince presume by any law to take upon him, as rightfully belonging to the See of Rome, a spiritual pre-eminence by the mouth of our Saviour himself, personally present upon earth, only to St Peter and his successors, bishops of the same See, by special prerogative granted; it is therefore in law, amongst Christian men, insufficient to charge any Christian man.”

The new Chancellor, Audley, remonstrated with him. “What! Do you consider yourself wiser and more conscientious than all the bishops or nobles in the kingdom?” More responded—

“My lord, I have for every bishop of yours, above one hundred; and for one Council or Parliament of yours (God knoweth what manner of one) I have all the Councils made these thousand years. And for this one kingdom, I have all other Christian realms.”

The Duke of Norfolk interjected: “We now plainly perceive that you are maliciously bent.” More responded—

“Nay, nay, very and pure necessity, for the discharge of my conscience, enforceth me to speak so much. Wherein I call and appeal to God, whose only sight pierceth into the very depth of man’s heart, to be my witness... the Church is one and indivisible, and you have no authority to make a law which infringes Christian unity.”²

Before these Acts were passed, the English Parliament had passed an Act—the *Act of Succession* (1534, 25 Henry VIII, c. 22)—purportedly annulling the King’s marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon and validating his marriage in January the previous year to Anne Boleyn. Pursuant to this Act the succession to the throne of England was to pass to the children of Anne Boleyn. By a later Act (1534: 26 Henry VIII, c. 2) an oath was to be administered to every adult requiring him to recognise Anne Boleyn as the

² This report is found in E E Reynolds, *The Field is Won: Life and Death of Saint Thomas More*, Milwaukee, 1968; and in Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Protestant Reformation* (transl. from the French by Audrey Butler), London, 1961. The original is in Harpsfield, *Life of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. W. Hitchcock and R. W. Chambers, (E.E.T.S., 1932). Daniel-Rops adds the last sentence of the reply which is not in Reynolds.

lawful wife of the King. A refusal to take this oath was misprision of treason, the penalty for which was the forfeiture of all property and life imprisonment. Having relieved his conscience of the matters which had led to his condemnation, More turned to this, the cause which had precipitated the King's schism—

“Howbeit, it is not for this supremacy so much that ye seek my blood, as for that I would not condescend to the marriage!”

Had he been given the opportunity, Bishop Fisher could have asserted the same with equal vehemence.

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Implacability of will is the prerequisite of adherence to principle. It is not to be confused with violence of mien, or choler in temper, though these may aid its expression. Sir Thomas More was the mildest of men. “Has nature ever fashioned a character more gentle, endearing or happier?” Erasmus asked. Robert Whittinton, another contemporary, said of More: “I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability?”³ That More was fearful of his ability to endure may be seen from the correspondence during his incarceration in the Tower of London with his daughter, Margaret. Yet endure he did and on the rock of his implacable will, as on that of Fisher, Henry Tudor broke himself.

“Anyone who loves father or mother... son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me,” Christ had said [Mt 10: 37]. And again, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? Not peace, I tell you, but division.” [Lk 12: 51] And, on another occasion, “...not peace, but a sword” [Mt 10: 34]. Fisher and More understood and realised—that is, *made real in their own lives*—these principles. In an age when the poisonous seed of subjectivism, planted years before by the Nominalist, Ockham, was beginning to sprout, these were ultimate realists.

It is arguable that his execution of Fisher and More sealed Henry's fate. After that it remained only for him to do as much evil as lay in his power before death claimed him. And what evil he did! In comparison with the harm precipitated by Henry Tudor in the history of the world, the efforts of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler pale into insignificance. For Henry was concerned in the essential, and original, issue; they with issues secondary, and derivative. For in the end there is only one issue that matters in all the world—whether one should follow the religion of God, or of man.

Had Henry not rebelled against the Pope to justify his sexual licentiousness, there would have been much greater resistance throughout Europe to Luther's heresy. It certainly would have failed in the British Isles for Henry himself had already controverted the heretic—and suffered his usual petulant, and irrational, response. Henry's small treatise *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* had earned him the title

³ In his *Vulgaria*, quoted by E. E. Reynolds in *The Field is Won*, op. cit., p. 146. Note by ‘fellow’ Whittinton means ‘one to compare with him’.

bestowed by Pope Leo X, *Fidei Defensor*, subsequently adopted as part of the royal style by statute [35 Hen. VIII, chapter 3]⁴, and still claimed by the English Crown (and with what irony!) today⁵. With the effects of Henry's schism to buttress that heresy, and the venality he had let loose moving like a tide over the Church's estates in England, Scotland and Wales, interest in the success of the Protestant revolt was entrenched and its likelihood made the more certain.

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It should not be forgotten that when he died Bishop John Fisher was a Cardinal, a Prince, of the Catholic Church.⁶ When Henry heard of Clement VII's belated bestowal of that dignity upon the Bishop, he promised in a crude jest that Fisher would have no head on which to repose the Cardinal's red hat.

John Cardinal Fisher was executed on 22nd June 1534, Sir Thomas More on 6th July following. The two martyrs, the one, ecclesiastical, the other, secular, are outstanding witnesses for the modern age of fidelity to that institution that Almighty God established, the Catholic Church and witnesses to the immense dignity of the sacrament of Matrimony so much belittled today. They are, likewise, witnesses to realism against the poison with which the lives of so many in the 21st century are infected, subjectivism.

Their importance in the Calendar of the Saints cannot be underestimated. Their commemoration deserves to be celebrated as an obligatory, rather than an optional, Memoria throughout the Church.

Michael Baker

1st November 2006—*Solemnity of All Saints*

⁴ See *The Field is Won*, op cit, p.149, for the details.

⁵ On Monday, 28th April, 2003, in the course of inaugurating a Jewish synagogue in Manchester, Prince Charles, heir to the throne of England, described himself as 'The defender of the Faiths', thereby seemingly bringing to completion the gutting of the title of all its significance begun by Henry some 470 years before him. *The mills of God grind slowly!*

⁶ He is so styled, St John Cardinal Fisher, in the list of the Catholic Hierarchy on the internet—cf. <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bfishe.html>