



A Reflection on Thomas More

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St. Thomas More Annual Dinner
Canberra

24 June 2022

Celebrating the feast of Thomas More, we are honoured that Australia's celebrated journalist and commentator on contemporary affairs Paul Kelly will speak on *Politics and Religion - The Growing Clash*.

I am delighted to offer a brief reflection on Thomas More who was no stranger to such a clash. In his biography, *The Life of Thomas More*, Peter Ackroyd recalls the conversation between William Roper and Thomas More after Henry VIII had visited Chelsea to discuss the matter of a possible annulment of his marriage to Catherine. Ackroyd observes, 'Henry seems genuinely to have convinced himself that he had incurred divine displeasure by marrying his dead brother's wife and that as a result he had merited the biblical punishment of conceiving no male issue from the forbidden union. Yet at the same time he was pursuing Anne Boleyn with gifts and letters. It would not take a cynic to suggest that his desire for an annulment was prompted by sexual as well as religious reasons. But this was the point that could never be made in public.'¹

Some time after the King's visit, while walking along the riverside at Chelsea with William Roper, Thomas More said, 'Now would to our Lord, son Roper, upon condition that three things were well established in Christendom, I were put in a sack and here presently cast into the Thames.' Roper asked, 'What great things be those, sir, that should move you so to wish?' More replied, 'In faith, son, they be these. The first is, that where the most part of Christian princes be at mortal wars, they were all at an universal peace. The second, that where the Church of Christ is at this present sore afflicted with many errors and heresies, it were well settled in a perfect uniformity of religion. The third, that where the King's matter of his

¹ Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More*, Doubleday, 1998, p. 269

marriage is now come in question, it were to the glory of God and quietness of all parts brought to a good conclusion.’²

I daresay until there be universal peace amongst nations and agreement on all matters theological in the Church, there will always be work to be done by the likes of Thomas More, regardless of the nuptial status of our leaders. And he will always be there to provide us with inspiration.

My recently deceased father had a great devotion to Thomas More. Just after he went on to the High Court bench, Dad delivered a lengthy speech on ‘*The Peace of Sir Thomas More*’ in which he spoke of More as ‘the paradigm of independence’:

‘He shows us that an individual cannot be made independent by others who satisfy his wants; independence is secured by the individual who sheds them. Independence is not a worldly attribute; it is an attribute of a man at peace. The strength of such a man flows not from position, possessions or power, but from a concordance between conscience and action.’³

Dad returned to this theme of independence two years later in a speech entitled ‘*The Independence of Thomas More*’. He described independence as ‘the quintessential professional virtue’: ‘Independence of popular acclaim, of power or patronage, of wealth, of improper influence by State or Church, by family or friends. It is a lonely virtue which, if it is not to be transformed into stubborn arrogance, requires humility of mind, devotion to learning, and breadth of experience.’⁴

After his retirement as Chief Justice he addressed the St Thomas More Society in Sydney recalling that he had a photo frame on his desk with postcards of the Holbein portraits of Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell from the Frick Collection in New York – ‘contemporaries, one of whom could interpret accurately the signs of the times, the other a masterful reader of the sky in Tudor England. More discerned what was good and valid; Cromwell perceived what was expedient and humanly sensible.’⁵ Ultimately each lost his head.

My father observed: ‘More died rather than deny his conscience. It was not a conscience that followed the *ipse dixit* of the Bishops of his Church. It was not a conscience that was born out of institutional loyalty. It was a conscience that grew over the years of prayer, study and reflection and the daily penance of the hair shirt.’

² Ibid, p. 270

³ F G Brennan, ‘The Peace of Thomas More’, Thomas More Lecture, 30 October 1981, Brisbane, published in *Utopia*, The Journal of the Thomas More Society, Sydney, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1990

⁴ F G Brennan, ‘The Independence of Thomas More’, 1983.

⁵ F G Brennan, ‘The Sky is Red’, Address to the Thomas More Society, Sydney, 6 July 2000, published in *Utopia*, The Journal of the Thomas More Society, Sydney, Volume 2, Issue 1, May 2001, pp. 3-7

Dad went on to say:

‘[T]o discharge Our Lord’s commission to Peter to feed my lambs and sheep and His direction to the Apostles to teach all nations, the Church must proclaim the truth intelligently and inspirationally to all. This is primarily the function of the Pope, the Bishops and the clergy, but it is a function incumbent on the laity as well. What will not do is an authoritarian demand for conformity – a demand that carries no conviction to the mind of the faithful and is alienating to those outside the Church.’

This was his key sentence about More’s conscience: ‘It was a conscience that sought to understand the Divine Will and, having understood it, to be obedient to the truth he saw.’ He asserted, ‘Conscience is unique to each person and what is done in obedience to conscience by one may differ from what is done in obedience to conscience by another. In any event, as consciences do differ, the external expression of conscience by one may differ from what is done in obedience to conscience by another’.

He expressed his sadness that Cardinal George Pell had taken to saying, ‘Catholics should stop talking about the primacy of conscience.’

He observed: ‘Had Thomas More and John Fisher followed not their consciences but the majority of the English Bishops at the time, we would not have had their example to inspire the human spirit and the history of the Church and of England would have been the poorer.’

This led to a detailed respectful correspondence between Pell and my father. Honouring my deceased father and the confidentiality of the correspondence from Cardinal Pell, might I simply close with a few quotes from my father’s letter to Cardinal Pell on 29 January 2002:

‘[W]hen officers of the church - even the Roman dicasteries - or individual bishops assert the power to prescribe what individuals or groups must do or refrain from doing, submission must surely depend on whether the individual consciences accept the prescription.’

‘But there can be no conflict between truth and reason, nor should there be any fear of discussion of the truth. I confess that the Pope’s prohibition of discussion on his teaching about women’s ordination seems to suggest that discussion is the enemy of truth. Far from leading to acceptance of the teaching, the prohibition casts doubt upon what is taught. It is counter-productive. Teaching authority of the Church is one thing; the power to compel belief is another.’

‘For me, the Church has authority to teach what is true and, as she proposes truth for my acceptance, I love and trust her. But that is an authority over religious truth, not an authority to compel belief or action. I fear the distinction is being missed in the ecclesiastical bureaucracy of today.’

I'm one Australian Catholic grateful for the commitment to conscience displayed by the late Sir Gerard Brennan. I'm delighted that he and Cardinal Pell could disagree cogently and respectfully. Long may the peace and independence of Sir Thomas More continue to inspire and challenge us as we prepare for the next phase of our Plenary Council, while there be a growing clash between politics and religion.