



Saint Thomas More: A Problematic Figure

Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

A sermon preached on the feast of Saint Thomas More, 22 June 2010, for The Thomas More Lawyers' Guild of Toronto.

HOWEVER MUCH we admire Saint Thomas More, we cannot ignore the limitations that his time and temperament placed on him. Historians universally have found his treatment of heretics to be intolerable. Society then *was* intolerant; during the short reign of the Catholic Queen Mary (1554-58), known to generations of Englishmen as “Bloody Mary,” 284 heretics were burned, of which fifty-six were women. Thomas More would have approved:

As for heretics, as they be, the clergy does denounce them. And so they be well worthy, the temporality doth burn them. And after the fire of Smithfield, hell doth receive them, where the wretches burn forever.

There is biblical precedent for this harshness, and not only in the Old Testament. Jesus may have urged us to forgive our enemies, but it seems that God does not. Listen to the climax of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” The Sermon on the Mount, the charter of Christianity, is almost as harsh:

Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

Matt 5.25

It is worth noting that, despite all the ballyhoo about tolerance, our society is no more tolerant than the sixteenth century was. Northrop Frye observed in *The Great Code* that no society ever tolerates anything it disagrees with. The difference is that our animosities have different targets. Think of the international outrage that led to the end of Apartheid in South Africa. Racism is intolerable to Canadians today, as you yourselves would demonstrate if I were here and now to make a denigrating remark about any racial group (except, of course, white males). It is the same with regard to issues about sexuality, as is indicated by the neologism “homophobia.” Thus, when Pope Benedict commented on contraception and AIDS during his visit to Cameroon, he raised a tidal wave of protest in Europe and North America. Or consider the violent reaction to Cardinal Ouellet’s simple iteration of the Church’s teaching about abortion. One journalist wrote that he hoped the Cardinal would die a slow, painful death, and the Quebec parliament unanimously passed a motion that recognized the universal right to abortion as constituent of the common good.

There is, however, a significant difference between the intolerance of the sixteenth century and ours, *viz.*, in the treatment of offenders. They punished criminals, we brainwash them. An amusing scene in the movie *Tootsie* makes the point. When Dustin Hoffman, disguised as a woman, joins his agent for lunch, the latter’s response is “Get therapy!” The therapeutic approach in vogue today is based on a radically different anthropology from that of earlier times, in that by it individual responsibility can be much reduced, sometime to the vanishing point. The limitations of the older attitude become clear when we examine its treatment of suicides. The principle was that people were responsible for their actions. It was therefore believed that anyone who killed himself must have committed the sin of despair, so that, as a necessary consequence, the suicide would be in hell. That is why he could not be buried in consecrated ground. We now know better; *I* know better. There has been a suicide in my family that we know was not the result of a rational decision, and I am convinced that such must be the case with the vast majority of suicides. But to resort to psychology too readily, as we are tempted to do, would be to eliminate guilt altogether. Ironically, the effect of such tenderness is to dehumanize the criminal. In the 1950s, when capital punishment was being debated in England, C.S. Lewis

wrote a famous essay called “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment.” In it he said,

I urge a return to the traditional or retributive theory—the notion of giving the wicked their deserts—not solely, not even primarily, in the interests of society, but in the interests of the criminal.

In other words, if a man is not free to choose evil, he is not free at all, either for evil or for good. His humanity threatened. (There may well be people who think our courts should be replaced by psychiatric clinics, but I doubt that many of them are here this afternoon.)

What was obvious to the mediaeval mind was that a criminal was responsible and so should be punished; the more serious the crime, the greater the punishment. As a result, executions were gruesome in the extreme. When, during the reign of “Good Queen Bess,” Saint Margaret Clitherow was brought to trial in 1586 for harbouring Catholic priests, she refused to enter a plea in order to excuse her husband and children from testifying. Her penalty was to be laid on the ground on a sharp stone and crushed to death. It took several days for her to die. The punishment for treason, which both Thomas More and John Fisher faced and which the Jesuit martyrs, such as Edmund Campion, actually underwent, was to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The victim was hanged until he lost consciousness. He was then revived, was cut open and, still conscious, had his entrails thrown into boiling water. Then he was beheaded, and his body cut into four pieces—“quartered.” Heresy, the greatest of all crimes, was, as we have seen, punished by the heretic’s being burned alive. Other forms of execution were equally terrible. In his *The Voices of Morebath*, Eamon Duffy describes the death of a priest in Exeter who resisted the reform. Clothed in his Mass vestments, he was left dangling from a gallows until he died of exposure, the same treatment that Henry VIII subjected the Carthusians of the London Charterhouse to when they refused the oath of supremacy. One begins to understand why death by beheading was welcomed, as an act of mercy Henry extended to Thomas More, and of realism for John Fisher whom imprisonment had so weakened that he could hardly reach the execution site still alive.

What can we learn from all this? The first lesson is *not* to reproduce the barbarous punishments of the past. To quote Eamon Duffy again, this time from *The Fires of Faith*:

The greatest barrier to a positive assessment of the Marian restoration remains the fact of the burning of more than 280 Protestant men and women, . . . which constitutes a horrifying moral blot on any regime purporting to be Christian.

And the second lesson is to safeguard the dignity of the wrongdoer who, as a human being, must answer for his deeds to God . . . and sometimes to the state. Our Christian anthropology views man as a free—and therefore a responsible—agent, who will be punished for vice and rewarded for virtue: “And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward” (Matt. 10.42). The Catholic view has been strongly expressed: redemption raises us to a higher level than Adam and Eve were (in the traditional understanding of Eden): “O God who wondrously created man and more wondrously re-created him. . . .” This statement applies not only to criminals, but to all of us, each in his own way. Like Adam we too must take the consequences of our actions, for good or for ill. That is the adventure of being born and of then reborn in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.