

Few Roman Catholic saints are the objects of as much sustained interest as Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). The highly favorable reception of Peter Ackroyd’s impressive 1998 biography, *The Life of Thomas More*, is one recent reminder of this fact; one has a hard time imagining a 450-page biography of Saint Theresa of Avila or Saint Anthony the Hermit being the featured selection of The Book-of-the-Month Club or described as a “brilliant” account of a person of conscience by Time magazine. As the playwright Robert Bolt famously declared a generation ago, Thomas More truly is “a man for all seasons.”

Much of the continued popular interest in More’s life undoubtedly can be explained by the spectacular events leading up to his death. Indeed, the last fifteen months of Thomas More’s life have the dramatic impact of a Shakespearean play. In April of 1534, the former Lord Chancellor, a respected lawyer, writer, and statesman, was summoned to the palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury to testify before King Henry VIII’s Commissioners. The only layman summoned, More refused to take an oath in support of Henry VIII’s decree that he—not the pope—was “Head of the Church” of England; this refusal resulted in More’s imprisonment in the Tower of London. After fourteen months of interrogation, physical torture, and isolation, Sir Thomas More was beheaded on July 6, 1535, on Tower Hill. It is easy to see, therefore, why More is popularly viewed today as a martyr for conscience, a “hero” who sooner would give up his life than abandon the moral demands of his conscience.

The fourteen months spent imprisoned in the Tower of London were, for More, a time of remarkable literary productivity. More’s most famous work from this period is his moving *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*. Less well known, but equally worthy of attention, is the incomplete *The Sadness, Weariness, Fear, and Prayer of Christ before His Capture*. No doubt one of the reasons this meditation is not well known is because it does not fit easily into the conventional view of More as a “Renaissance” Christian Humanist in the mode of Erasmus. In this prayerful reflection on Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, More reveals that he was preoccupied in his final hours with the way “Our Savior faced the hours before His death.”

While in prison, More also penned letters on subjects such as the nature and aim of prayer, the glory of heaven, the meaning of penance, the demands of moral virtue, and the proper use of ecclesial and political power. The one theme, however, that runs through all these letters is More’s reflection on the reasons he could not, in good conscience, swear allegiance to the King’s authority over the Christian church. Like More’s two other prison works, these previously hard-to-find letters reveal much about the heart and the mind of this great man in his final days. Recently, Father Alvaro De Silva, professor of theology at Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, has gathered together More’s correspondence in a single volume, titled *The Last Letters of Thomas More*. This volume (which includes letters written to More from his wife, Dame Alice, and his daughter, Margaret Roper) also includes an insightful introduction in which Father De Silva draws attention to the Catholic character of More’s thought, particularly in his writings on conscience.

### Conscience and the Acquiescence to Truth

In letter after letter, this prisoner of conscience movingly describes how following the dictates of one’s conscience brings a kind of “inward gladness ... to the virtuous mind.” For More, acts of conscience provide an “intimate glimpse of one’s soul.” Yet in these paeans to the liberty of one’s

conscience (Father De Silva's introduction notes that More uses the word conscience over one hundred times in these letters), one sees an understanding of conscience that has little in common with what goes by that name today.

Whereas modern doctrines of conscience characteristically emphasize the self-sufficiency of the individual's judgment, More stresses its communal nature. More, to be sure, recognized the uniqueness of the individual conscience. More was, after all, imprisoned precisely because he could not, in good conscience, swear allegiance to Henry VIII's oath. But in contrast to the modern claim that the individual can create his own moral values, More saw the "formation of conscience" as "the fruit" of an education "in the truth." Far from being the arbitrator and creator of its own moral order, the human conscience is in need of conforming to the truth. For More, the formation of conscience is the result of a long process in which one discovers a preexisting created moral order. This was, in some sense, the issue in More's dispute with Henry. Henry sought to substitute his own law for the "higher law of God and Christ's Church." Nothing underscores the profound differences between More's and the modernist's understanding of conscience more than this fact: Whereas modern thought views the individual's conscience as being above all other authorities, More's conscience testifies to the superiority of the church's authority to his king's. More's refusal to take Henry's oath was not an act of civil disobedience but, rather, of obedience to truth and thus, in his view, an act of "genuine liberty."

More makes this point in a long, artful letter in which he relates to his daughter the story of "Company." The letter opens with Margaret urging her father to take Henry's oath in order to regain his freedom. More proceeds to tell her about Company, "an honest man from another quarter," who cannot agree with the questionable verdict rendered by his fellow eleven jurors. Angered that Company is stubbornly getting in the way of their decision, the eleven urge him to be "Good Company" and agree with their verdict. Open to the possibility of correction, Company says that while he already has considered the matter, he would like the eleven "to talk upon the matter and tell him ... reasons" he should change his mind. After the jury declines his offer, Company decides to keep to his own company; otherwise, "the passage of [his] poor soul would passeth all good company." As More reminds Margaret, he himself "never intended (God being my good lord) to pin my soul to another man's back ... for I know not whether he may hap to carry it."

"Kings' Games"

Reading these letters, one is struck not only by the probity of More's conscience and depth of his faith but also by the acumen of his statesmanship. More repeatedly alludes to the social and political upheaval that Henry's proposed new political and religious order would bring about. More recognized that Henry's claim to be "Head of the Church" of England would break the traditional Catholic soul of England. On the one hand, Henry's usurpation marked an unjustified intrusion of the political into the spiritual realm, a "false and deadly" claim by the political to have care of man's immortal soul; on the other, it signaled the end of the unitary moral and social order that was Christendom. More foresaw that Henry's actions eventually would bring about the dissolution of the laws, institutions, and customs that had upheld Christian civilization. As More so eloquently put it, Henry willfully had forgotten "the first lesson ... [he] gave me at my first coming into his noble service ... that [in seeking the foundations of order] I should first look unto God and after God unto Him."