WHEN THE SAINTS…

6TH of JULY THOMAS MORE & JOHN FISHER

11th of JULY BENEDICT of NURSIA

**BACKGROUND**

In England the ‘new learning’ was the philosophical and literary aspect of the renaissance, which had originated in the most developed commercial centres in Europe, northern and central Italy, and the Netherlands, under the patronage of a few important rulers. The term ‘Humanism’ was coined at the time, to epitomise what, for a brief period, around the turn of the 16th century, was a movement to reform education, centred principally around the Dutchman Erasmus, and a small circle of his friends and followers, including THOMAS MORE & JOHN FISHER, besides a few other Englishmen.

The movement was characterised by a general sense of optimism and a reaction against the mediaeval scholastic philosophers who monopolised university life until the introduction of Greek and Hebrew studies, and a renewed conscientiousness in reading and interpreting classical writings, which, in turn, brought new insights into biblical scholarship. Both Erasmus and More excoriated abuses within the church, but when Luther’s quarrel with Rome took on serious political and religious dimensions, a rift emerged between his followers and those of the ‘new learning’ who opted to remain within the Catholic fold. Another reason for this was that Pope Leo X was brother to Lorenzo [Medici] the Magnificent, and himself a generous patron of the arts and the new learning; his successor, Clement VII, was also a Medici, but lacked his predecessor’s style.

When we looked at SAINTS & MARTYRS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION it was pointed out that very few of the better-known characters died with entirely clean hands. If/when you read Hilary Mantel’s Cromwell trilogy it’s no criticism to state that her take on his attitude to MORE & FISHER is necessarily the product of her own imaginative window into Cromwell’s mind, rather than any attempt on her part to judge these two outstanding characters in their true historical context.

Whatever our take on the English Reformation, the fact is that it was primarily accomplished with a series of acts of state; many of the bishops, most of whom, with the notable exception of JOHN FISHER of Rochester, were trained primarily in civil law, and could make sense of the move in those terms. Another reason why the bishops seemed to roll over at Henry’s power-grab was that there appeared to be no assault on existing doctrine comparable with that on the Papacy and monastic life.

Fisher, unlike his fellow bishops, was an internationally distinguished theologian whose writings were well enough known to have influenced discussions at the Council of Trent. More, of course, was a layman and a distinguished lawyer and man of letters. MORE is better known than FISHER, but both were ornaments of their age, and their imprisonment and subsequent executions illustrate precisely how far Henry VIII had travelled in a matter of 25 years.

Already the focus of general admiration and hope among the fashionable humanist circle, Henry had inherited the throne in 1509 as a young, energetic and cultured man with an interest in learning, and a full treasury. His wife, Catherine, though a little older, and somewhat better educated, was popular and still very beautiful. All this changed fairly rapidly with the emergence of Luther to say nothing of Henry’s inopportune campaign to obtain papal approval for his divorce.

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THOMAS MORE was born in 1478 and taken into service by Cardinal Morton, he of the infamous ‘Morton’s fork,’ a way of ensnaring rich people who tried to disguise their wealth, into paying huge ‘benevolences’ to King Henry’s father, Henry VII. More lived with Morton’s ménage, and was eventually sent by him to Oxford, where he studied law, rose rapidly, and became under-sheriff of London.

He was very soon elected to Parliament, where he made a stir by opposing the grant of a subsidy to the old king so effectively that the bill was lost and it was reported to Henry that ‘a beardless boy has deprived you of your will;’ with the result that More remained out of favour until old Henry’s death, and considered moving abroad. Morton must have turned in his grave, but the experience of holding out against the royal will, on this occasion, probably reinforce More’s reluctance to take on the Chancellorship when the younger Henry offered it to him a quarter of a century or so later.

As a lawyer and advocate, it was said that More would not plead causes that he could not honestly support himself, and that he wouldn’t take fees from orphans, children or widows.

He was a strict ascetic; wearing a hair shirt; using a log as a pillow, and flagellating himself on Fridays. He would have liked to have married his wife’s younger sister, but would not permit the elder the indignity of being passed over: something very much to his credit, however, was the remarkable education he bestowed on his beloved daughter Margaret, to whom he was genuinely attached.

It was as part of various embassies to the low countries that More became acquainted with some of the foremost proponents of the New Learning, but it wasn’t until 1506, during Erasmus’s second long stay in England, that he met More, and a close friendship soon developed, such that Erasmus dedicated his famous satire ‘In praise of folly’ to More, in whose Chelsea home it was written: …

Shortly thereafter More wrote his famous ‘Utopia,’ which, in spirit, is probably best read as another satire on bad government and false religion, but which is still recommended at university level on some sociology courses. It is short, pithy and witty, and, like’ Gulliver’s Travels ‘ the encomiums on enlightened government policies are as much part of the satire as the direct criticism of things like enclosure of common land, and the harsh treatment of criminals. Tony Blair’s ‘Tough on the causes of crime’ could have arisen directly from More.

It has to be said, however, that the enlightened and tolerant religious policy advocated in ‘Utopia’ is at serious odds with More’s relentless pursuit of Lutherans, and, in particular, William Tyndale, the author of the English Bible on which most of the King James version is still based. As a layman, More could have left the pursuit of heretics to the bishops, whose job it was.

It was really the times that had changed both Henry and More, who seems to have, at least, acquiesced, if not actually supported the King in his attempt to get his divorce from Catherine ratified, and had he not been arm-wrestled by Henry into becoming Lord Chancellor after Wolsey’s fall from grace, perhaps it may have been less important for the King to insist on More’s taking the oath of allegiance to him as supreme head of the church; but More had already resigned his post, so that, in effect, the disagreement between them became personal; an issue of opposing wills.

Awaiting execution in the Tower, More wrote to his ‘darling Meg’ to the effect that, whilst she might feel anxiety, nobody was more afraid of physical pain than he was himself, and that he spent many waking hours in dread of it, knowing, of course, that the mandatory traitor’s death was to be hanged, drawn and quartered, unless he could hope for Henry’s clemency, which, in the event, took the form of commuting More’s sentence to beheading; a move probably motivated as much by public relations as by the recollection of former friendship.

More wrote that, despite this dread of physical pain he knew, with St Paul, that God would uphold him in whatever circumstances as long as his conscience was clear. As it stands this is fine and saintly, but More left a family behind, of whose future he couldn’t be sure. If this is how he understood the words of Jesus in relation to setting considerations of family to one side in pursuit of holiness, later generations may think differently. Hilary Mantel’s implication that More actually sought martyrdom may not, after all, be too fanciful.

At the scaffold, More died with dignity, stating to the many onlookers that he died a faithful servant to the King, but first to God.’

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ST JOHN FISHER was born in 1469 in Yorkshire to a well-to-do family; educated at Cambridge, becoming Doctor of Divinity; was elected vice-chancellor in 1501; and in the following year he was appointed to the theology lectureship founded by lady Margaret Beaufort, to whom, in or around 1497, he had become her confessor, and encouraged her patronage of his university, assisting in her two foundations of Christ’s and St John’s colleges.

Fisher became Chancellor of Cambridge In 1504 and was created Bishop of Rochester, until his resignation in 1534. Between 1505-8 he was also President of Queen’s College. Fisher was one of the greatest scholars of his time: his library was said to be the finest in England and, like More, he was a friend of Erasmus, whom he persuaded to teach Greek at Cambridge.

He was honoured as an exemplary bishop, even in his lifetime; not only dealing with the administration and discipline that belonged to his office, but visiting his churches and religious houses on foot.

He was admired and renowned as a preacher, for the warm manner and vivid and lively style in which he expressed his love of God, and at the death of Henry VII in 1509 he was chosen to preach at the funeral, and at the memorial for the Lady Margaret [Beaufort], his patron, and grandmother to the new King Henry VIII.

He once assured his hearers that the more that sinners remember their sins, the more God forgets them! He observed, however, the decline in morals as he understood them; and told his hearers that they should

‘It seemeth Almighty God to be in a manner in a dead sleep, suffering these great enormities so long. No, we must do as the disciples did, then, in the ship: they awaked Jesus, their master, from sleep, with cryings and great noise that they made. In like manner let us raise up Almighty God by our prayers.’

He wrote that:

‘Unlike mothers, who will suffer for their children but forget them when their children are unkind in return, God will never forget us: therefore we be more dearly beloved of God than children ben of their mothers; and no carnal ‘fader’ may love his child better than our heavenly ‘fader’ Loveth us. Truly, all we ben children of the heavenly father, all of us are prodigal children, gone astray, and summoned to make the journey home.’

[The original spelling here, as well as the syntax, shows Fisher’s Yorkshire upbringing: his formal writings, of course, would have been in Latin.]

He wrote several theological and spiritual treatises that circulated throughout Europe, but he is no longer regarded as the author of Henry’s famous work affirming the seven sacraments against Luther’s doctrines, which won Henry the title of ‘Defender of the faith,’ from the Pope: in the 1520’s, though, he became one of the foremost advocates for the retention of Catholic faith and doctrine.

While More seems to have initially gone along with Henry’s divorce and re-marriage, Fisher alone stood in defence of Henry’s faithful wife, whom the king had loved and admired for twenty years. Although Rochester was not particularly high up in the episcopal pecking order, the universal respect in which Fisher was held probably saved his neck for the present.

Fundamentally whilst Fisher was undoubtedly conservative in his religious views, his personality and manner must have been far removed from that of the curmudgeon old goat that authors seem to favour in portraying him. Like More, though, Fisher was no courtier, and, despite having been confessor to Henry’s illustrious grandmother, in time the king forbade him ever to show his face in court again.

Like More, Fisher was unalterably opposed to the break with Rome, but by staying in the ring and fighting his corner, he managed to get a restraining clause inserted into the Act of Supremacy that qualified the King’s power as head of the church as to be exercised only ‘as far as the law of God doth allow.’

Inevitably, of course, Fisher had not only made an enemy of Henry, but of Cromwell, and those of his placemen who supported the protestant cause; and between 1530-6 several bishops died, who could be replaced with protestants. Fisher became increasingly isolated, and at the attainder of ‘the maid of Kent,’ Elizabeth Barton, an outspoken nun who was being manipulated by her superiors, Fisher’s name was included, but on this occasion his sentence of imprisonment was commuted to a fine.

In 1534 Fisher resigned his See, having refused to take the oath required of him by the act of succession. This gave Henry the excuse to consign him to the Tower where he was ill-treated and deprived of his most basic needs, in the hope that, at age 66, and in poor health, nature might take its course.

In 1535 Pope Paul III seriously misjudged the situation: hoping to save Fisher he created him a cardinal, at the news of which Henry lost his temper and was heard to declare that by the time Fisher’s hat arrived from Rome, he should no longer have a head on which to place it!

It was reported of Fisher that he had made contact with various agents of Emperor Charles V, Catherine of Aragon’s nephew, to invade England and reinstate her on the throne. If this treachery could had been proved, there would have been no need for the trickery and sham trial that was staged in order to legitimise his execution on 22nd of June.

Fisher wrote ‘A Spiritual Consolation’ from the Tower to his sister Elizabeth, who was a Dominican nun:

‘ ’If you doubt of His wisdom, then behold all this world; how the heavens are apparelled with starts, the air with fowls, the water with fishes, the earth with herbs, trees and beasts; how the stars be clad with light, the fowls with feathers, the fish with scales, the beasts with hair, herbs and trees with leaves, and flowers with cent, wherein doth well appear a great and marvellous wisdom of him that made them ...

Finally, his good and gentle manner is all full of pleasure and comfort so kind, so friendly, and so liberal and beneficious, so piteous and merciful, so ready in all opportunities, so mindful and circumspect, so dulcet and sweet in communication. ’

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Very little is reliably known about the life of BENEDICT of NURSIA. Columba Stewart, in his book on the Benedictine tradition, writes that: Like most early monks, Benedict resists our desire to know him.’

There is a hagiography which takes up the second book of Gregory the Great’s ‘dialogues,’ which was written around fifty years after Benedict’s death in 547. Gregory relied on four sources: two of the abbots that succeeded Benedict at Monte Casino, the abbot at Subiaco, and another at Rome. It seems churlish to omit all the miracles, but let’s include only those that are part of the story, the outline of which makes perfect sense when reflecting on what failures and disappointments must have shaped Benedict’s experience in devising his famous rule for monks, bearing in mind that he was also building on several previous attempts to devise such a rule.

What we know is that he was probably born around 480 at Nursia in Umbria, and went to Rome to be educated. He was so overwhelmed by the paganism and immorality he encountered there that he went off to live in a cave at Subiaco, some 30 miles east of Rome. For a while there, he lived as a hermit, enduring severe privations, seeking as little contact as possible with others. An admiring monk delivered his food on the end of a rope, with a bell attached to get Benedict’s attention.

As his reputation for holiness spread a number of disciples tried to attach themselves to him, so he very reluctantly agreed to head up a small monastery. Unsurprisingly it didn’t work out, and the story goes that one of the monks tried to poison him with wine, and that on blessing the cup it shattered. Benedict then gathered the monks together; told them he forgave them, but that he’d leave them, having had reservations in the first place; and hoped that they would find a leader able to accommodate himself to their wishes.

Benedict resumed his solitude, only to be implored by more disciples to start over with another monastery. Before long he had established 12 of them, with 12 monks in each; but according to Gregory, the envy of local clergy led to another attempt to poison him; this time with a loaf of bread, [but it is said that, on this occasion, on blessing the bread, a raven came down and snatched it.!] Benedict migrated once more, and this time to Monte Casino, about 80 miles south of Rome.

Once established at Monte Casino, and with the experience of these previous failures taken well to heart, Benedict drew up his world-changing Rule.

When he died, Benedict was buried beside his reputed twin, St Scholastica, who had also taken up the monastic life.

It is no exaggeration to affirm Benedict as founder/father of western monasticism. By the ninth century, his rule had superseded all others. Over past weeks we’ve looked at successive reforms of the Benedictine order; with Alcuin, under Charlemagne; the Cluniacs, and touched on the Cistercians, which was an order centred eventually on Bernard of Clairvaux, whose intention was to return as nearly as possible to Benedict’s original rule.

Like many pioneers in their field, Benedict never intended to head up a Benedictine order; neither did he. The structure he set up remains one of federation, which worked so well for example, with the spread of the Cluniac spirituality. Abbots visited one another’s houses, and simply learned and emulated best practice.

So, if we seek to know something of Benedict, it’s worth exploring his ‘Rule’ just a little, to discover why it has survived so well down the centuries.

The Franciscan ‘rule’ [1223 started out as a few precepts from the Gospel, which, of course, had to be bulked out by Francis’ successor to make it even remotely practical, to which Francis objected strongly. Fundamentally, of course, Francis simply wasn’t worldly enough to think through anything resembling a constitution, seven centuries after Benedict!

Benedict, on the other hand, built with wisdom derived directly from his understanding of the human condition: he built for the future, and with practical considerations of geography and climate in mind.

In article 3, the abbot is to call everyone together and put forward the question to be discussed: on reflection, ‘it is often to the younger that the Lord reveals what is best.’ While insisting on humility and obedience, the abbot is enjoined to prudence and justice. ‘Let all follow the rule AS THEIR GUIDE, no one diverge from it WITHOUT GOOD REASON …’

… From Easter until 1st of November, let the hour of keeping vigils be so arranged that after a short interval in which the brothers may go out for the necessity of nature, Lauds, which are always said at break of day, follow immediately.’

HOW THE MONKS ARE TO SLEEP Let them sleep clothed, girdled with belts or cords, but without knives at their sides, lest they injure themselves in sleep … and thus let the monks be always ready, and when the signal is given let them rise without delay, and rival one another in their haste to the service of God, yet with all reverence and modesty: Let not the younger brothers have beds by themselves, but dispersed among the seniors; and when they rise for the service of God let them gently encourage one another, BECAUSE THE SLEEPY ONES ARE APT TO MAKE EXCUSES.

Most of the 20’s deal with discipline. Offences seem to consist mainly of disobedience, talking back, and grumbling, which comes up a good deal elsewhere.

The offender is to be privately rebuked by seniors twice, then in public. If he understands the gravity of excommunication, that goes ahead, otherwise it’s corporal punishment. The excommunication is to be regulated according to the abbot’s judgement of the fault, which, if it’s a light one, involves taking meals alone, not participating in the offices, nor reading lessons:

For a grave fault, effectively the brother is sent to Coventry: he’s not to be blessed by anyone passing by, nor is his food. Any other brother who communicates with him gets himself the same punishment!

The abbot, however, is to show THE UTMOST SOLICITUDE and care towards those that offend… and send older ‘PLAYMATES’ to console and comfort him lest he be overwhelmed by excess of sorrow; and he’s to be prayed for by all. The abbot is to exercise all diligence ‘LEST HE LOSE ANY OF THE SHEEP ENTRUSTED TO HIM; FOR HE SHOULD KNOW THAT HE HAS UNDERTAKEN THE CARE OF WEAK SOULS, NOT THE TYRRANY OVER THE STRONG.’

In extreme situations, when expulsion is necessary, the man will have three opportunities to return and re-establish himself from the lowest position, after which the expulsion becomes irrevocable; three strikes …

30 CONCERNING BOYS UNDER AGE who are apt not to understand the severity of excommunication, should be punished with extra fasts or severe blows! They were still birching youths in the Isle of Man until quite recently!

33 Whether the monks should have anything of their own. MORE THAN anything else is the vice of property to be cut off root and branch from the monastery; let no one presume to give or receive anything without the leave of the abbot, or retain anything as his own. They should have nothing at all, for, indeed, it is not allowed to the monks to have bodies or wills in their own power.

The abbot issues two sets of clothes; a bed is of mattress, under-blanket, blanket and pillow, and if the a brother goes out he is issued with better clothing which, however, he gives back on his return.

Clothing is to be of suitable length, and made with a hair shirt in winter, but provision of material is to depend on availability, and always of the cheapest possible.

34 WHETHER ALL SHOULD RECEIVE NECESSARIES EQUALLY ‘He who needs less, let him thank God and not be grieved; but he who needs more, let him be humiliated on account of his weakness, not made proud on account of the indulgence that is shown him. Above all, let not the evil of grumbling appear.’

35 OF THE OFFICES OF THE KITCHEN The monks take it in turns to serve one another and nobody is to be excused except through sickness or preoccupation with some matter of great necessity whereby is gained a greater reward and increase of charity.

An hour before each meal, the weekly servers are to receive a cup of drink and a piece of bread over and above their rations, so that they may wait on their brethren without grumbling or undue fatigue.

36 OF THE CARE OF THE SICK ‘Before all things and above all things care must be taken of the sick, so that the brethren shall minister to him as to Christ himself. But let the sick, on their part, remember that they are being cared for to the honour of God, and let them not, by their abundance, offend the brothers who serve them, which offences, nevertheless, are patiently to be born, for from such a greater reward is acquired. … The use of baths shall be offered to the sick as often as is necessary, but to the healthy and especially to youths, more rarely!

The eating of meat shall also be allowed to the sick; to the delicate, to assist their recovery, but when they have grown better they shall all, in the usual way, abstain from flesh.

37 OF THE OLD AND YOUNG although human nature of itself is prone to have consideration for these ages … nevertheless the authority of the rule also should provide for them. Their weakness shall always be taken into account, and in the matter of food, the strict tenour of the rule shall by no means be observed where they are concerned.

38 OF THE WEEKLY READER [at table] at the beginning of the week when he starts his work he’s to pray against the spirit of elation! Tantalisingly, there’s no further clarification, as to whether this deals with laughter or pomposity; perhaps both, but it’s a perceptive observation, bearing in mind how often we hear recordings of radio announcers ‘corpsing!’ The injunction to signal a brother’s wish for anything eventually, according to Thomas Merton, became a resource for very great humour and mischief.

39 OF THE AMOUNT OF FOOD there were to be two cooked dishes at every meal, so that if a [‘picky] monk couldn’t make his meal from one, he could choose the other, and if fresh fruit and veg were available they should be provided in addition. One pound of bread should suffice per day. If particularly heavy work has been done, it’s within the discretion of the abbot to stipulate for more …’avoiding excess above all things that no monk be overtaken by indigestion[!]

40 OF THE AMOUNT OF DRINK. ‘Each one has his own gift from God; … therefore it is with some hesitation that the amount of daily sustenance for others is fixed by us. Nevertheless, in view of the weakness of the infirm, WE BELIEVE THAT ONE PINT OF WINE IS ENOUGH FOR EACH ONE PER DAY. Let those to whom God gives the ability to endure abstinence know that they will have their reward; but the Prior shall judge if either the nature of the location or labour, or the heat of summer requires more; taking care in all things lest satiety or drunkenness creep in. INDEED WE READ THAT WINE IS NOT SUITABLE FOR MONKS AT ALL, BUT BECAUSE IN OUR DAY IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO PERSUADE THE MONKS OF THIS LET US AGREE, AT LEAST, AS TO THE FACT THAT WE SHOULD NOT DRINK TO EXCESS, BUT SPARINGLY, FOR WINE CAN MAKE EVE THE WISE TO GO ASTRAY.’ How humane is that!!!

The rule goes on: ‘where, moreover, owing to local conditions the amount aforesaid cannot be provided, but much less or nothing at all, those who live there shall bless God and NOT GRUMBLE, AND WE ADMONISH THEM ABOVE ALL, THAT BE WITHOUT GRUMBLING.’

There’s no theory or abstraction here at all; but the Rule includes biblical precepts and direct quotations, from which Benedict has adapted humane and workable solutions as well as spiritual guidance and discipline are necessary, but it’s possible to read into all this the wealth of experience Benedict must have gathered before writing this rule. Moreover, what he does make clear is that these precepts are the starting-blocks, as it were, and that anybody who aspires to higher things may use these principles as a base from which to travel spiritually.

His concern for variations of climate and geography show a really practical consideration for communities to adapt their needs to prevailing conditions and his understanding of individual needs, either to progress or to keep up, are well in advance of their time.

Considering the extent to which Benedictine monasteries managed to maintain standards of hospitality and civilised behaviour, particularly during the middle ages, it is appropriate that he has been declared Patron Saint of Europe.

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PRAYER

Benedict, of course, emphasises the importance of LECTIO DIVINA, which Andy Rooney took for some of us a while ago, and, while there are many paths and styles of prayer, here is Benedict’s

20 OF REVERENCE IN PRAYER... When we make applications to men in high positions, we do not presume to do so without reverence and humility; how much more, then, are we bound to entreat God, the lord of all, with all humility and devout purity of heart: and we must recognise that we are not heard for our much speaking, but for our purity of heart and tears of contrition. Therefore our prayer must be brief and pure, UNLESSS IT CHANCE TO BE PROLONGED WITH THE INSPRIATION OF GOD’S GRACE… When we assemble together let the prayer be quite brief…