

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Feast of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher

St. Thomas More Society of America

St. Joseph Parish, Capitol Hill

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Years ago, due to inclement weather, I was stranded in London in the week just before Christmas. Worse things than that can happen to a traveler, of course, but the unexpected pleasure of a week in London allowed me to visit places I hadn't seen for many years – such as Tyburn Hill – where many English martyrs, including Thomas More and John Fisher, laid down their lives in witness to the faith.

I was moved to stand on the spot where, in 1535, More and Fisher were beheaded for their refusal to comply with the Act of Supremacy, a law which made King Henry VIII Head of the Church and which broke ties of communion with the Roman Pontiff.

I also visited the parish church in the Tower of London, St. Peter in Chains, and prayed in the crypt where St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher are buried.

St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher laid down their lives rather than violate their consciences or their sacred principles. Their courageous witness of faith continues to stir the minds and hearts of people yearning for authentic freedom, and specifically, for religious freedom . . . just as it inspired those who came to Maryland a century later in 1634, seeking not only to worship God freely but indeed to practice their faith publicly.

We do well to speak of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher in the same breath, because they demonstrate how, together, the laity and clergy, each according to their specific vocations, can and must defend and foster religious freedom.

They also demonstrate two kinds of religious freedom that need to be defended: the right of individuals to form their consciences and the right of church institutions to

fulfill their missions without undue interference on the part of the State. Allow me a word about each.

St. Thomas More

As you know, Thomas More was a devout Catholic layman, a husband and a father, a learned and accomplished man, a lawyer by profession. His conscience was formed by principle and virtue at a time when both were routinely sacrificed for political expediency.

Thomas More was chosen to serve in Parliament and, during the reign of King Henry VIII, rose to become the Chancellor of England.

When called upon by the King to betray his principles and his conscience, however, More chose instead to put everything at risk, including his own life.

Throughout, he defended his cause brilliantly, but to no avail. Indeed, he staved off martyrdom as long as he could, but when it came, More accepted it courageously.

St. Thomas More teaches us how lay persons are to form their consciences so as to bear witness to the truth in the midst of civic and professional responsibilities. Saint John Paul II wrote that "...the life and martyrdom of St. Thomas More have been the source of a message which spans the centuries and which speaks to people everywhere of the inalienable dignity of the human conscience . . . "

He added:

". . . Whenever men or women heed the call of truth, their conscience then guides their actions reliably towards good. Precisely because of the witness which he bore, even at the price of his life, to the primacy of truth over power, St. Thomas More is an imperishable example of moral integrity."(Proclamation of Thomas More as Patron of Statesman, October 31, 2000, no. 1).

Though only a few could claim St. Thomas More's influence and integrity, this great saint stands for *the individual believer and citizen* who seeks, in the words of United States Bishops, "[to] connect worship on Sunday to work on Monday" . . . "[to] carry the values of our faith into family life, the market place, and the public square."

(U.S. Bishops, "Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice, Introduction, 1998)

St. Thomas More could also be said to represent that conscientious private employer or employee who, seeks to avoid doing or facilitating moral evil in course of daily work while striving to live and work in accord with the demands of social justice.

He stands for those who go about their daily work in accord with their faith (cf., DH, 13), and those who understand how dangerous it is to the common good to separate faith from life, the Gospel from culture (CL, 212).

How important for us to pay attention to St. Thomas More's witness, living in an era when religious expression is often restricted in the workplace and indeed marginalized, even demonized, by society's opinion makers. So often it is not before courts of law that we are called to bear witness but rather before the court of public opinion.

It is vital that we form leaders not only in the law but in all the professions who have the moral integrity and the savvy to bear witness to the truth and to influence society through what Blessed John Henry Newman calls, the apostolate of personal influence.

St. John Fisher

St. John Fisher demonstrates how pastors of the Church must, in the course of their ministry, bear courageous witness to the truth.

Ordained a priest in 1491, Fisher would become the Bishop of Rochester in Kent. In the House of Lords, he strongly opposed state interference in Church affairs. At the same time, he led the Church in reforming itself first and foremost by his own spirit of learning and holiness in communion with the Holy Father, the Successor of Peter (Pope Paul III).

At length, St. John Fisher found himself at odds with King Henry VIII and with laws passed by the British Parliament which required him to take an oath repudiating papal authority and acknowledging the King as Head of the Church.

This pastor of souls and lover of the Church refused, saying: “I cannot in anywise possibly take [the oath], except I should make shipwreck of my conscience, and then were I fit to serve neither God nor man.”

In the wake of St. John Fisher’s martyrdom, churches, monasteries, and centers of learning were seized by royal power and were either destroyed or made to break their ties with the Roman Catholic Church.

The government interfered in the internal life of the Church with a cruel thoroughness John Fisher could not have imagined even a few years earlier.

He symbolizes for us our struggle to maintain religious freedom *for church institutions and ministries* such as our schools and charities.

Although we are not facing the dire brutality that confronted St. John Fisher, our Church and her institutions do find themselves in perilous waters. Even if we are experiencing, at least at the federal level, a season of relief from onerous rules, none of us should imagine that the struggle is over. Sooner or later, this season of relief will end, and barring legislative and further judicial relief, we’ll experience fresh troubles.

How important for pastors of souls to sway the hearts of congregants and through them to instill in our culture a newfound respect for human dignity and its fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.

How important that we find a language and an approach that will move our culture beyond the view that religious freedom is little more than “a license to discriminate.”

We must foster and defend the right of the believers not only to worship in freedom, but also to bear witness to the truth in the public square and to serve the common good through an array of church ministries.

Linking the two freedoms

It still comes naturally to many Americans to defend the rights of individuals to follow their consciences not only in their personal lives but also in the course of their

daily work. And I know how deeply you value and support church institutions which do the corporal works of mercy on a grand scale.

Inspired by St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, let us be renewed in our resolve to defend both the religious freedom of individuals and the religious freedom of church institutions - for the two are inseparably linked.

If we fail to defend the rights of individuals, the freedom of institutions will be at risk and if we fail to defend the rights of our institutions, individual liberty will be at risk.

More needs Fisher and Fisher needs More!

May these great saints and martyrs intercede for us now and in the days and years to come!

