

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thomas More

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: June 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thomas More

English humanist, Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, martyr of conscience.

Feast day	June 22
Born	February 7, 1478, London, England
Died	July 6, 1535, Tower Hill, London, England
Canonized	May 19, 1935, by Pope Pius XI
Era	16th century
Patron saint of	politicians, statesmen, lawyers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer of Saint Thomas More: "Give Me Thy Grace, Good Lord"

Novena to Saint Thomas More

Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula, Tomb of Thomas More at the Tower of London

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thomas More

Saint Thomas More was an English lawyer, writer and statesman of the Renaissance. A friend of Erasmus and the author of *Utopia*, he became Lord Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, then resigned rather than approve the king's break with Rome. Imprisoned in the Tower of London for refusing to swear an oath against his conscience, he was beheaded on July 6, 1535. Canonized in 1935, he is celebrated on June 22 with Saint John Fisher, and in 2000 Saint John Paul II proclaimed him patron of statesmen and politicians.

Who was Saint Thomas More?

Thomas More was born in London on February 7, 1478, the son of John More, a lawyer and later a judge. As a teenager he served as a page in the household of Cardinal John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, who noticed his quick wit. He then studied at Oxford, and law in London at Lincoln's Inn.

For a few years he lived near the London Charterhouse and shared in part the prayer of the Carthusian monks, asking himself whether he was called to religious life. In the end he chose marriage and public life, but all his life he kept discreet habits of prayer and penance.

Key dates in the life of Thomas More

- **February 7, 1478**: Born in London.
- **c. 1499**: First meeting with the humanist Erasmus, who becomes his friend.
- **c. 1501-1504**: Spends time at the London Charterhouse and reflects on monastic life.
- **1505**: Marries Jane Colt; they have four children.
- **1511**: Widowed, he marries Alice Middleton.

- **1516**: *Utopia* is published in Louvain.
- **1521**: Knighted; he has already been in the king's service for several years.
- **1523**: Speaker of the House of Commons.
- **October 1529**: Lord Chancellor of England, after the fall of Cardinal Wolsey.
- **May 16, 1532**: Returns the Great Seal and leaves office.
- **April 13, 1534**: Refuses the oath tied to the Act of Succession; a few days later he is imprisoned in the Tower.
- **July 1, 1535**: Tried at Westminster Hall and condemned for high treason.
- **July 6, 1535**: Beheaded on Tower Hill.
- **1886**: Beatified by Pope Leo XIII.
- **May 19, 1935**: Canonized by Pope Pius XI, together with John Fisher.
- **October 31, 2000**: Pope John Paul II proclaims him patron of statesmen and politicians.

A Christian humanist

Thomas More belonged to the circle of humanists who wanted to renew Christian culture by returning to ancient texts. His friend Erasmus dedicated *The Praise of Folly* to him; its Latin title, *Moriae Encomium*, plays on his name. In 1516, More published *Utopia*, the story of an imaginary island governed by reason, which allowed him to criticize the injustices of the Europe of his day with humor. The word "utopia," which he coined, has passed into every language.

His house at Chelsea, on the Thames, was known for its studious and cheerful atmosphere. More had his daughters educated as well as his sons, which was rare at the time; his eldest daughter, Margaret Roper, became a respected Latin

scholar. The family prayed together, read Scripture at table and welcomed scholars and artists, among them the painter Hans Holbein the Younger, who made several portraits of the household.

In the service of the king

A respected lawyer and a judge known for his integrity, More entered the service of Henry VIII and rose to the highest office in the kingdom, succeeding Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor in 1529. But the king wanted his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, and he would soon declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.

More did not oppose the king publicly, but he could not approve. When the English clergy submitted to the king in May 1532, he returned the Great Seal and withdrew, much poorer, with his family.



The Tower of London, where Thomas More was imprisoned for fifteen months.

Prison and martyrdom

In April 1534, summoned to Lambeth, he refused the oath required by the Act of Succession, which implied rejecting the authority of the pope. He was willing to accept the succession to the throne set by Parliament, but not the rest, and he condemned no one for taking the oath. He was locked in the Tower of London, where he spent fifteen months.

There he wrote spiritual works, including *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and a meditation on Christ's agony in Gethsemane. His letters to his daughter Margaret show a clear-sighted man, worried for his family, yet at peace.

Tried at Westminster Hall on July 1, 1535, he was condemned for treason on the strength of disputed testimony. He was beheaded on Tower Hill on July 6, two weeks after Bishop John Fisher. According to an account of the time, he declared on the scaffold that he died "the king's good servant, and God's first." His body was buried in the chapel of the Tower; his head, displayed on London Bridge, was recovered by his daughter Margaret.

Why is Saint Thomas More the patron saint of politicians and lawyers?

Thomas More showed that one can be fully engaged in the world, in law, politics and family life, without giving up one's conscience. He did not seek martyrdom: he used every resource of the law to protect himself, kept silent as long as he could, and never stopped loving his king and his country. That is why John Paul II gave him to statesmen and politicians as their patron in 2000, and why lawyers, judges and many Catholic law societies in the English-speaking world honor him. His humor, even on the scaffold, shows his inner freedom. His story reached a wide public through Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thomas More in art

- **The Lord Chancellor's robes**, often trimmed with fur, as in Holbein's famous portrait.
- **The chain of office**, a gold collar of linked "S" shapes.
- **A book**, for the writer and scholar.
- **An axe**, the instrument of his martyrdom.
- **His family around him**, as in Holbein's group drawing, a reminder of the father and husband.

Where to pray to Saint Thomas More

- **Tower of London**: the Chapel Royal of Saint Peter ad Vincula, where his body was buried.
- **Canterbury**: Saint Dunstan's Church, where his head rests in the Roper family vault.
- **Chelsea, London**: Chelsea Old Church, where he prayed, and his statue on Cheyne Walk.
- **Westminster, London**: Westminster Hall, where he was tried in 1535.

To pray with him, use his prayer "Give me thy grace, good Lord," written in the Tower, or follow the novena to Saint Thomas More from June 13 to 21, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint Thomas More: "Give Me Thy Grace, Good Lord"

During his imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1534-1535, Saint Thomas More wrote in his own hand, in the margins of his Book of Hours, a long prayer in English known as *A Godly Meditation*. It begins with the words "Give me thy grace, good Lord." Below you will find extracts from this text, his last words on the scaffold, and an original prayer to Saint Thomas More by Saintspedia.

"Give me thy grace, good Lord"

Extracts from the sixteenth-century English text, with spelling modernized; the original is in the public domain.

Give me thy grace, good Lord,
to set the world at nought,
to set my mind fast upon thee,
and not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths.

Gladly to be thinking of God,
piteously to call for his help,
to lean unto the comfort of God,
busily to labor to love him.

To walk the narrow way that leadeth to life,
to bear the cross with Christ,
to have continually in mind the passion that Christ suffered for me,
for his benefits unceasingly to give him thanks.

To buy the time again that I before have lost,
of worldly substance, friends, liberty, life and all,
to set the loss at right nought, for the winning of Christ.
To think my most enemies my best friends.

Source: Thomas More, *A Godly Meditation*, written in the Tower of London in 1534-1535 in the margins of his Book of Hours. The full text is longer; only extracts are given here, in the order of the original.



Saint Thomas More at prayer.

A saying to meditate on

> *"The king's good servant, and God's first."*

Source: words spoken on the scaffold on July 6, 1535, as reported in an account of the execution circulated in Paris shortly afterward. They sum up his loyalty to his country and his faithfulness to his conscience.

Prayer to Saint Thomas More

Saint Thomas More, you who served your king and your country with skill and loyalty, and who chose to lose your office, your goods and your life rather than betray your conscience, pray for me.

Teach me to do my work seriously, to love my family tenderly and, in the middle of my affairs, to keep time for God. Give me your inner freedom and your good humor, even in times of trial.

I entrust to you those who govern, those who make laws and those who administer justice: may they seek the common good and not their own interest, and may they have the courage to say no when they must. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the grace to stay faithful to God first, without despising anyone, and to be able to say at the end of my life that I have been a good servant. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thomas More is celebrated on June 22 with Saint John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, martyred for the same cause; the anniversary of his death falls on July 6. Pray to him before a difficult decision, an election, a court case or a new professional commitment, and for lawyers, judges and elected officials. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Thomas More, from June 13 to 21.

NOVENA

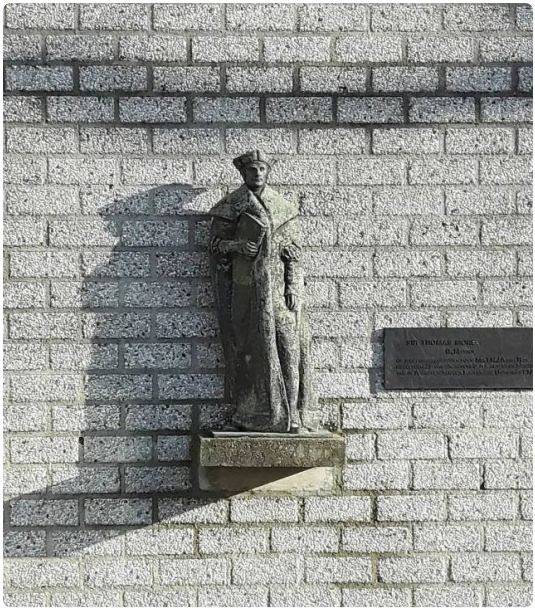
Novena to Saint Thomas More

This novena to Saint Thomas More is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by his life and writings. It is not an official liturgical text or a text written by the saint. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on June 13: it ends on June 21, the day before his feast on June 22. You can also pray it at any time of year, before an important decision, for your family, or for those who hold public office.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for the day helps you live it in the spirit of Thomas More, who joined prayer and active life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the path of his life: his discernment as a young man, his family at Chelsea, his friendships, his work as lawyer and judge, his service as Lord Chancellor, his resignation, his refusal of the oath, his months in the Tower and his death. You may pray it alone, as a couple or as a family, or with colleagues who share your profession.



Saint Thomas More, in a church statue or window.

Day 1: Discerning a vocation

As a young lawyer, Thomas More shared for several years in the prayer of the London Carthusians before choosing marriage and public life. He took time to discern, and that time bore fruit all his life.

Prayer: Lord, help me recognize the path you set before me, and follow it with all my heart.

Today: Look back on an important choice in your life and give thanks for it.

Day 2: Loving one's family

In the house at Chelsea, the family prayed together, studied and laughed. More saw to the education of his daughters as well as his sons. Holiness begins at home.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. Give me the patience, tenderness and humor that make a home happy.

Today: Share a meal or a moment without screens with your family.

Day 3: Friendship

The friendship between Thomas More and Erasmus is one of the most famous of the Renaissance. True friends help us think, believe and remain ourselves.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the friends you have given me. Make me a faithful and sincere friend.

Today: Get back in touch with a friend you have lost sight of.

Day 4: Working with integrity

As a judge, More was known for his speed and impartiality; he refused gifts meant to buy his decisions. Work done well is already a service to God.

Prayer: Lord, make me honest and competent in my work, even when no one is watching.

Today: Carefully do a task you usually rush through.

Day 5: Serving the common good

More accepted public office without clinging to it. As Lord Chancellor, he remained simple and approachable. For him, power was a service, not a possession.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who govern us. Give them wisdom, integrity and care for the weakest.

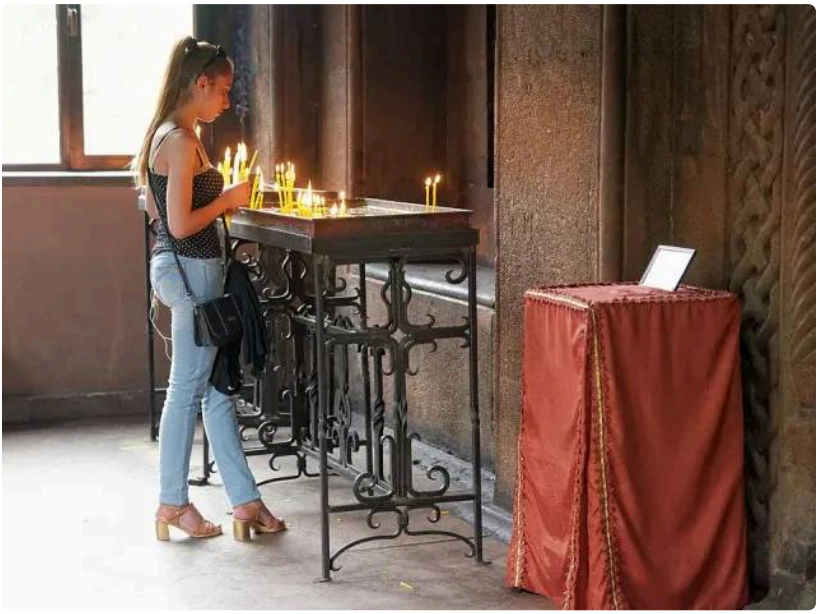
Today: Pray by name for an elected official or leader in your town or country.

Day 6: Knowing how to let go

In 1532, More returned the Great Seal and lost almost all his income. He broke the news to his family with humor. Giving up a position is not losing everything.

Prayer: Lord, detach my heart from what is not essential, so that I remain free to do what is right.

Today: Freely give up something you are too attached to.



Praying with Saint Thomas More.

Day 7: Following one's conscience

More did not judge those who took the oath, but he could not take it himself. He chose silence, then faithfulness. A well-formed conscience is a voice we cannot silence without losing ourselves.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, enlighten my conscience and give me the strength to obey it, without pride and without fear.

Today: Make a right decision you have been putting off for a long time.

Day 8: Peace in trial

In the Tower of London, More wrote, prayed and comforted his daughter Margaret. He meditated on Christ's agony in Gethsemane: fear is not a sin, and it can become prayer.

Prayer: "Give me thy grace, good Lord, to set my mind fast upon thee."

Today: Read Matthew 26:36-46, the account of Gethsemane.

Day 9: God's servant first

On the scaffold, More forgave, joked once more and called himself the king's good servant, and God's first. His death crowned a life in which faithfulness to God and service to others were never opposed.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Thomas More, keep me faithful to you first, and make me a good servant of my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Today: Forgive someone who has wronged you.

Closing prayer

Saint Thomas More, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for my family, for those who govern and for those who administer justice. Obtain for us integrity, good humor and the courage of conscience. Amen.

After the novena

On June 22, if you can, attend Mass for the feast of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, and pray for your country and its leaders. Keep one small act from these nine days as a habit, perhaps a family meal without screens or a regular prayer for those in public office. And when your conscience is tested, remember Thomas More's prayer: "Give me thy grace, good Lord."

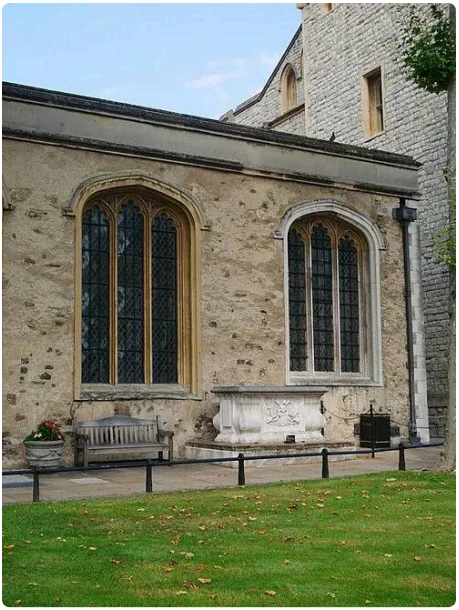
PILGRIMAGE

Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula, Tomb of Thomas More at the Tower of London

The Chapel Royal of Saint Peter ad Vincula, within the walls of the Tower of London, is where the body of Saint Thomas More was buried after his execution on July 6, 1535. Saint John Fisher also rests there. It is the starting point of a London pilgrimage in the footsteps of the saintly chancellor, from the Tower to Chelsea, and on to Canterbury.

A chapel in the heart of the Tower

The Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula takes its name from the apostle Peter freed from his chains, a dedication well suited to a prison church. The present building dates mostly from the early 16th century. For centuries it has served as a burial place for prisoners executed at the Tower or on Tower Hill. Thomas More was buried there without a monument; the remains of John Fisher, first buried elsewhere, were later placed there near him. The chapel now belongs to the Church of England and remains a place of worship.



Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula, tomb of Thomas More at the Tower of London.

Tower Hill, the place of execution

A few steps from the walls, on Tower Hill, a plaque in the gardens of Trinity Square marks the site of the scaffold where many condemned people were executed, among them Thomas More and John Fisher. It is a simple place of quiet reflection, in the middle of the city.

Chelsea, the family home

Farther west, on the banks of the Thames, Chelsea preserves the memory of the house where More lived with his family. He attended Chelsea Old Church, where he had a chapel rebuilt, and had a monument placed there in his lifetime, for which he wrote the epitaph himself. In front of the church, a seated statue of the saint looks out over the river.

Praying in the footsteps of Thomas More

Before you set out, you may reread the life of Saint Thomas More or a few of his prison letters to his daughter Margaret. On site, a time of silence lets you entrust an intention, for example for someone facing a decision of conscience, or for those who govern. The prayer "Give me thy grace, good Lord", written a few yards from here, suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Thomas More

- **Canterbury**: the Church of Saint Dunstan, where his head rests in the Roper family vault, recovered by his daughter Margaret.
- **Westminster Hall** (London): the great medieval hall where he was tried on July 1, 1535.
- **Lincoln's Inn** (London): the law school where he was trained.
- **London Charterhouse**: the monastery whose prayer he shared in his youth, and several of whose monks were martyred in 1535.

Practical information

The Tower of London is visited with an admission ticket; the Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula is generally accessible as part of the visit, notably with the guided tours by the Yeoman Warders, and Anglican services are held there. Tower Hill is served by the Underground, at the station of the same name. Access conditions change from time to time: check with the Tower of London before you come. Around June 22 and July 6, Catholic parishes in London sometimes organize pilgrimages in honor of the two martyrs.

Credits and sources

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