

Letter from Erasmus to John Faber (*EE 2750*)¹

Freiburg, late 1532

[More resigned May 16, 1532]

How fast has the rumor flown, all the way here: the news that the distinguished Sir Thomas More has been removed from the office of chancellor, and that he has been succeeded by another noble, who then immediately set free the men More had sent to prison for their contentious teachings!

5 Both Homer and Vergil lift “rumor” to the sky (*ossa* in the former, *fama* in the latter) as a flying bird, all covered with feathers, to show that nothing is faster. But the speed of any winged creature seems slow and sluggish to me, compared with the swiftness of this rumor which has suddenly spread so widely: lightning flashing into every quarter of the globe would hardly be faster. And although this story has been flying through

10 everyone’s lips constantly, and although I have not received any letters from Britain (Thomas More’s letter, which I am now forwarding to you, had been held up several months in Saxony), nevertheless I was “more certain than certain” that all this talk was the emptiest gossip. For I knew very well the character of that most humane ruler, with what constancy he cherishes friends once he has decided to take them to

15 his heart, with what reluctance he removes anyone from his favor, even when he has detected some human error in them. On the other hand, I also knew Thomas More's honesty, his skillfulness in handling matters both large and small, the vigilance of that extraordinary prudence of his, so free from the habit of “turning a blind eye.” In fact, the King's

20 benevolent attitude toward More became clearer to me when he freed him from that office – a most prestigious office, yes, but also fraught with burden and danger -- than when he conferred the honor on him in the first place. When the king, in spite of More's protests, saddled him with that heavy load, the King showed his love of country, and was only looking out for his own and the realm’s best interests; when, at More's request, the King

25 removed that load, he showed his love of More. When he appointed him, he merited praise and universal acclaim for his beneficence and wisdom in entrusting a most difficult post to the man best qualified in the realm for bearing so heavy a burden; when he released him, he earned high praise for his humanity by letting his own judgment and concern for the common good yield a bit to the pleas

30 of a friend asking for the kind of leisurely retirement Cassiodorus once obtained from his ruler.² And I have no doubt that More was brought by very solid reasons to plead with the king for that release. Otherwise, neither would he ever have been so bold as to ask for a discharge so soon, nor would the King have been so compliant as to grant his request

35 for just any excuse.

¹ The individual lines of this English translation correspond as much as possible to the lines of the Latin text of Allen's edition, found at <http://www.thomasmorestudies.org/Erasmus/EE2750.pdf>. Translated by Mary R. M. Taneyhill and Gerald Malsbary for the Center for Thomas More Studies ©2014, but the first 108 lines are based on a translation by Marcus A. Haworth, S.J. which appeared in *Erasmus and His Age: Selected Letters of Desiderius Erasmus*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (NY: Harper & Row, 1970).

² i.e. Theodoric the Ostrogoth, king of Italy 493 – 526 A.D..

The king knew that the status of his entire domain depended for the most part upon the integrity, learning, and wisdom of the Chancellor. For this office of Chancellor is not, as it is in some countries, merely that of a secretary. In dignity, the office ranks next to the crown, so that, when the Chancellor appears in public, to his right is displayed a golden scepter, topped by a golden imperial crown, and to his left, a book. The one symbolizes supreme power under the king, the other, knowledge of the laws. For he is chief justice of the whole British dominion, the right eye, so to speak, and the right hand of the king and of the royal council. A very wise leader would never have entrusted such a lofty responsibility to someone who had not been tested. Hardly anyone else saw more deeply, or loved more seriously, the rare and almost divine endowments of More's nature. In fact, even the Cardinal of York,³ despite his own misfortune, was no fool: when he realized that he himself had no hope of returning to his former power, he declared that no man in the entire island, other than More alone, was equal to so great an office. And this was no mere "favorable recommendation" or vote of confidence. When the Cardinal was still alive, he was hardly just towards More; and more truly feared him than loved him. The judgment of the people was not otherwise. And so, just as he entered upon his office with such congratulations of the whole realm as no man had received before, so did he resign it with the deep sorrow of all the wise and good. For he resigned after he had earned the most wonderful praise of all: that none of his predecessors had administered the office more skillfully or with greater justice. And you know how critical the people usually are of top civil officials, especially during their first years in office. Even so, I could easily convince you of what I am saying if I could show you the letters of the most eminent men expressing their congratulations to the king, to the realm, to More himself, and even to me, in my enthusiasm about More's acceptance of the office; and then, by contrast, the letters written by the same men, deploring the fact that the commonwealth had lost such a judge and "counsel-giver" – *boulēphóros*, to use Homer's word for him.

I do not doubt that the king has replaced More by some distinguished man, although he is utterly unknown to me. Now, with regard to the luster of his own family's heritage, Thomas More, with his clearly philosophical character, never pursued it much, nor boasted of it. He was born in London, that most famous of all cities, and to be born and educated in that city is regarded by the English as bringing a good deal of nobility along with it. His father was by no means obscure, being a doctor of British law, a profession of the highest distinction among the English, and said to be the origin of a large part of the nobility of that island. Young More followed in his father's footsteps, and did it so well, that the father, though competent in every way and illustrious in his own right, was overshadowed by the son. Of course, nobody more truly casts a light upon his ancestors than when he overshadows them like this!

I shall pass over the titles of honor with which both were decorated – and not through solicited or purchased favor, but through the free decision of the king – unless

³ i.e., Thomas Wolsey, 1473- 1530.

80 perhaps, we are to think that true nobility is won only by strenuous and repeated exploits in war,
 while distinguished service to the commonwealth
 in times of peace, and accomplished by intelligence rather than
 arms, deserves no honor at all. The better the general condition of a commonwealth,
 the less need it has for military exertions. But the services of men who excel in learning, good judgment
 85 and jurisprudence are always necessary to kings and
 kingdoms, both in times of war and in times of peace. We hear
 the oracular voice of the scripture that says: "By me kings reign."⁴ And yet
 it is not the voice of the military but of wisdom that keeps war from breaking out in the first place,
 and, when war cannot be avoided, to make sure that it be waged with the least possible damage to the
 90 commonwealth. It is a greater blessing to avoid war altogether than carry it out bravely.
 Peace, in turn, cannot long endure, and if it is lasting, only engenders bad
 morals in the people unless it be directed by the counsels of the prudent.
 If Torquatus became famous through ripping the collar from a Gallic enemy's neck,
 will another man not win fame who for many years has furnished himself to his native land as a just judge
 95 and loyal counselor? The earliest Roman emperors thought far otherwise: they conferred the highest
 honors on their legal assistants, who were renowned for their knowledge of the law.
 In fact, they even decreed that teachers of grammar and logic
 and professors of law who had been exemplars of learning
 and integrity for twenty years should be decorated with the same honorary insignia
 100 as were the imperial deputies, and the rank of imperial deputy was equal to
 the rank of the emperor's attendants and generals. The twelfth chapter of Justinian's Code "On
 Professors" attests to this.⁵ Today, however, people are counted "noble" only when their blood
 bestows the insignia of nobility, and not if they are given (you might say "sold") these titles by the ruler.
 But I would think that the honor conferred by a ruler of the state
 105 upon those who have served the state well counts as a double
 nobility, since in this case the authority of the ruler comes in addition to virtue, and virtue is the parent of
 all true nobility. If ancient family origin is lacking, it is more glorious to earn nobility than to receive it
 from one's forefathers.

But I know this praise is of only the slightest importance to More,
 110 who would rather bequeath love of piety to his posterity than the honor of a distinguished rank. And as
 for what they are saying about prisons, whether it is true or not, I do not know.
 This point is certain: that most mild-natured man was not troublesome to anyone who, after being
 admonished by him, would be willing to return to their senses from the contagion of a sect.
 Do such critics demand that the highest judge of so great a kingdom not have any prisons?
 115 The man hates the seditious teachings by which, sadly, the world is now so shaken.
 He does not hide this feeling, nor does he want it to be secret, being so devoted to piety
 that, if he leaned the slightest bit toward one side or the other of two extremes,
 he would seem to be closer to superstition than to impiety. Yet this
 is pretty good proof of an extraordinary kind of mercifulness: the fact that
 120 under him as Chancellor no one has suffered capital punishment for disapproved teachings,⁶

⁴ *Prov* 8:15.

⁵ *Codex Justinianus* XII: 15

⁶ Actually six individuals were executed for "seditious treason" under More's chancellorship. Under his successor Thomas Audley there were 15 or 16.

while so many have been put to death in both Germany and France.

Is this not a merciful hatred of the impious, when someone, though having the legal right to execute them, is so eager to heal their faults that he leaves their persons remain unharmed? Surely the critics are not demanding that, while representing the king, he favor a new, seditious, movement against the opinion of the king and bishops? Let us suppose that
 125 he was not at all repulsed by strange teachings (a thing far from the case):
 he would still either have to resign from the office that he held,
 or else only pretend to be enjoying the royal support.

Finally – to set aside, for now, any conflict about doctrines – who
 130 can be unaware how many amateurish and quarrelsome people would be prepared, under these circumstances, to get away with all kinds of wickedness, were it not for the strictness of public officials keeping such ever-growing audacity in check? And are they indignant that in England the kingdom's highest judge has done what a parliament has been sometimes forced to do in states that have changed their religion? And if it had not been done,
 135 false preachers would long since have burst into the chambers and libraries of the rich, and anyone who had something would be considered a Papist. But so great is the audacity of so many, so out of control their malice, that even the originators and sponsors of the new doctrines are wielding their own pens fiercely against them. And did they want the supreme judge of England
 140 to look the other way, while such filth flooded the kingdom with impunity? A kingdom flourishing in wealth, talent, and especially religion? It can, of course, be true that some are being granted release from the prisons to please the new Chancellor, persons who were harmless, or imprisoned on relatively light charges: the sort of thing that normally happens when new kings succeed to the throne, simply
 145 to please the multitude. The same thing happened, I suppose, when More himself first took office. But what are those *Triptolemi*⁷ doing, who sow such tales? Is it to convince people that a haven has been prepared among the English for sects and supporters of sects? And yet judging by the letters of many by no means unimportant men, it is clear to me that the King is somewhat less friendly
 150 toward the new teachings than the Bishop or priests. No pious man does not hope for a correction of the church's morals; but no prudent man thinks we should accept universal confusion.

When I heard that Thomas More had been raised to the highest dignity, since it seemed to me that I understood something of his talent, thanks to
 155 our long acquaintance, I wrote that I publicly congratulated the King and country, but did not privately congratulate the man himself. Now, however, I sincerely do so because, with the utmost favor of his ruler, with the entire nation's most honorable testimony, it has speedily become his good fortune to extricate himself from the labyrinths of civil affairs, an opportunity given neither to Scipio Africanus,
 160 nor Pompey the Great nor Marcus Tullius Cicero. Octavian Augustus hoped to put down the burden of empire, but never had the chance. Now in the fullness of his lifetime Thomas More has attained with dignity the kind of life to which he has been inclined since his youth, so that now

⁷ *Triptolemus*, ancient Greek hero/god of agriculture, taught by Demeter and famous for spreading the art of agriculture around the world. Erasmus plays on the agricultural metaphor with the verb *serunt* (“they sow”).

he might freely have leisure with his own family (for if anyone loves his family⁸, he does) for worthwhile
 165 pursuits and religious devotion. He has built, by the Thames river, not far
 from the city of London, a country-seat that is by no means primitive, yet not
 so magnificent as to cause envy, but still comfortable: there he spends time with the intimate company
 of his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, his three daughters and as many sons-in-law, making
 170 altogether eleven with his grandchildren so far. He has, by the favor of Christ, seen his children's children,
 and is going to see the ones to be born from them. For since all of them are
 in the bloom of life, it is likely that a numerous progeny will come.
 But even he himself could still be the father of many children
 if his wife had not already ceased to bear children by reason of age. He married her
 as a widow, and has not raised any children by her. The children he does have, he begot
 175 by his former wife, whom he lost while still a young girl with several
 children. But although his wife be sterile, and advanced in age,
 he loves and cherishes her no otherwise than if she were a girl fifteen years old.
 Hardly anyone else now living loves his children more, nor does he see any difference
 between a matron and a girl: but such is the kindness of his disposition, or rather,
 180 to say it better, such is his piety and wisdom, that whatever comes his way
 that cannot be corrected, he comes to love just as wholeheartedly as if nothing better
 could have happened to him. You could say that his house is another Platonic Academy.
 But I dishonor his home when I liken it to Plato's Academy,
 where they discussed numbers and geometric figures,
 185 and on occasion moral virtues; this home of More's you could more rightly call
 a school and gymnasium of the Christian religion. There is no man or woman there
 who does not have leisure to study the liberal arts and worthwhile reading, although
 the chief and primary concern is for piety. No quarrel or nagging word
 is to be heard there, no lazy person to be seen. But such good family
 190 discipline is not secured through scolding or arrogance, but
 with courtesy and benevolence. All are busy about their duty, but there is liveliness
 there and no lack of self-possessed merriment.

In the church of his neighborhood he erected a common tomb for himself and his family, and
 brought the remains of his former wife there, since any kind of divorce from her
 195 displeased him. The wall has an inscribed tablet, testifying to the fortune and
 manner of life of the man; my servant has written this down word-for-word. You will
 receive a copy with this letter.⁹ I see that I have been rather loquacious,
 but it gladdens me to talk about a friend to a friend. By addressing the people frequently,
 you are acting like a true bishop – a thing most pleasing to all good people.
 200 May your example encourage many imitators!

The things you wrote me about King Ferdinand's affairs were most welcome to me;
 After such preambles I am called to have good hope, that someday fortune will correspond to the virtues
 of the best and holiest ruler. Farewell.

⁸ Erasmus uses the Greek word *philostorgos*, "one who likes family affection."

⁹ More sent Erasmus a copy with *Epistle* 2831 (Allen edition).