

More's Letter to His Daughter Margaret, 3 June 1535

3 June 1535
Tower of London

Our Lord bless you and all yours.

For as much, dearly beloved daughter, as it is likely that you either have heard or shortly shall hear that the Council was here this day, and that I was before them, I have thought it necessary to send you word how the matter stands. And verily to be short I perceive little difference between this time and the last, for as far as I can see the whole purpose is either to drive me to say precisely the one way or else precisely the other.

Here sat my Lord of Canterbury, my Lord Chancellor, my Lord of Suffolk, my Lord of Wilshire and Master Secretary. And after my coming, Master Secretary made rehearsal in what wise he had reported unto the King's Highness, what had been said by his Grace's Council to me, and what had been answered by me to them at mine other being before them last. Which thing his Mastership rehearsed in good faith very well, as I acknowledged and confessed and heartily thanked him therefore. Whereupon he added that the King's Highness was nothing content nor satisfied with mine answer, but thought that by my demeanor I had been occasion of much grudge and harm in the realm, and that I had an obstinate mind and an evil toward him and that my duty was being his subject; and so he had sent them now in his name upon my allegiance to command me to make a plain and terminate answer whether I thought the statute lawful or not and that I should either acknowledge and confess it lawful that his Highness should be Supreme Head of the Church of England or else to utter plainly my malignity.

Whereto I answered that I had no malignity and therefore I could none utter. And as to the matter, I could none other answer make than I had before made, which answer his Mastership had there rehearsed. Very heavy I was that the King's Highness should have any such opinion of me. Howbeit if there were one that had informed his Highness many evil things of me that were untrue, to which his Highness for the time gave credence, I would be very sorry that he should have that opinion of me the space of one day. Howbeit if I were sure that other should come on the morrow by whom his Grace should know the truth of my innocence, I should in the meanwhile comfort myself with the consideration of that. And in like wise now though it be great heaviness to me that his Highness have such opinion of me for the while, yet have I no remedy to help it, but only to comfort myself with this consideration that I know very well that the time shall come, when God shall declare my truth toward his Grace before him and all the world. And whereas it might haply seem to be but a small cause of comfort because I might take harm here first in the meanwhile, I thanked God that my case was such in this matter through the clearness of mine own conscience that though I might have pain I could have no harm for a man may in such case lose his head and have no harm. For I was very sure that I had no corrupt affection, but that I had always from the beginning truly used myself to looking first upon God and next upon the King, according to the lesson that his Highness taught me at my first coming to his noble service, the most virtuous lesson that ever prince taught his servant; whose Highness

to have of me such opinion is my great heaviness, but I have no means, as I said, to help it but only comfort myself in the meantime with the hope of that joyful day in which my truth towards him shall well be known. And in this matter further I could not go nor other answer thereto I could not make.

To this it was said by my Lord Chancellor and Master Secretary both that the King might by his laws compel me to make a plain answer thereto, either the one way or the other.

Whereunto I answered I would not dispute the King's authority, what his Highness might do in such case, but I said that verily under correction it seemed to me somewhat hard. For if it so were that my conscience gave me against the statutes (wherein how my mind giveth me I make no declaration), then I nothing doing nor nothing saying against the statute, it were a very hard thing to compel me to say either precisely with it against my conscience to the loss of my soul, or precisely against it to the destruction of my body.

To this Master Secretary said that I had before this when I was Chancellor examined heretics and thieves and other malefactors and gave me a great praise above my deserving in that behalf. And he said that I then, as he thought and at the leastwise Bishops did use to examine heretics, whether they believed the Pope to be the head of the Church and used to compel them to make a precise answer thereto. And why should not then the King, since it is a law made here that his Grace is Head of the Church, here compel men to answer precisely to the law here as they did then concerning the Pope.

I answered and said that I protested that I intended not to defend any part or stand in contention; but I said there was a difference between those two cases because at that time, as well here as elsewhere through the corps of Christendom, the Pope's power was recognized for an undoubted thing which seems not like a thing agreed in this realm and the contrary taken for truth in other realms. Whereunto Master Secretary answered that they were as well burned for the denying of that as they be beheaded for denying of this, and therefore as good reason to compel them to make precise answer to the one as to the other.

Whereunto I answered that since in this case a man is not by a law of one realm so bound in his conscience, where there is a law of the whole corps of Christendom to the contrary in matter touching belief, as he is by a law of the whole corps though there hap to be made in some place a local law to the contrary, the reasonableness or the unreasonableness in binding a man to precise answer, standeth not in the respect or difference between beheading and burning, but because of the difference in charge of conscience, the difference standeth between beheading and hell.

Much was there answered unto this both by Master Secretary and my Lord Chancellor over long to rehearse. And in conclusion they offered me an oath by which I should be sworn to make true answer to such things as should be asked me on the King's behalf, concerning the King's own person.

Whereunto I answered that verily I never purposed to swear any book oath more while I lived. Then they said that I was very obstinate if I would refuse that, for every man doth it in the Star Chamber and everywhere. I said that was true, but I had not so little foresight that I might well

conjecture what should be part of my interrogatory, and as good it was to refuse it at first as afterward.

Whereto my Lord Chancellour answered that he thought I guessed truth, for I should see them and so they were showed me and they were but two. The first whether I had seen the statute. The other whether I believed that it were a lawful made statute or not. Whereupon I refused the oath and said further by mouth, that the first I had before confessed, and to the second I would make none answer.

Which was the end of the communication and I was thereupon sent away. In the communication before, it was said that it was marveled that I stuck so much in my conscience while at the uttermost I was not sure therein. Whereto I said that I was very sure that my own conscience, so informed as it is by such diligence as I have so long taken therein, may stand with mine own salvation. I meddle not with the conscience of them that think otherwise, every man *suo domino stat et cadit* [Romans 14:4, 1 Cor 10:12] . I am no man's judge. It was also said unto me that if I had rather be out of the world as in it, as I had there said, why did I not speak even out plain against the statute. It appeared well I was not content to die though I had said so. Whereto I answered as the truth is, that I have not been a man of such holy living as I might be bold to offer myself to death, lest God for my presumption might suffer me to fall, and therefore I put not myself forward, but draw back. Howbeit if God draw me to it himself, then trust I in his great mercy, that he shall not fail to give me grace and strength.

In conclusion Master Secretary said that he liked me this day much worse than he did the last time, for then he said he pitied me much and now he thought that I meant not well; but God and I know both that I mean well and so I pray God do by me.

I pray you be, you and my other friends, of good cheer whatsoever fall of me, and take no thought for me but pray for me as I do and shall do for you and all them.

Your tender loving father,

Thomas More, Knight.

From *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters* , Ed. Elizabeth Rogers, Yale University Press, 1961, Letter #64, pp. 249-253.