

# 'Counsel, Comfort, and Conscience in More's Letters to Fellow Prisoner Nicholas Wilson

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This is a study of the two letters of Thomas More to Nicholas Wilson written while the two men were imprisoned in the Tower of London. *The Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* illuminates the role of comfort and counsel in the two letters. An article of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* is used to probe More's understanding of conscience in the letters.

**Keywords:** Thomas More, prison letters, Nicholas Wilson, comfort, counsel, conscience, Thomas Aquinas

*Cet article analyse les deux lettres de Thomas More à Nicholas Wilson, écrites alors que les deux hommes étaient emprisonnés à la Tour de Londres. En rapprochant ces lettres du Dialogue du Réconfort, l'auteur en révèle la fonction consolatrice et conseillère. C'est à travers un article de la Somme théologique de Thomas d'Aquin que s'éclaire la conception que More a de la conscience.*

**Mots-clés:** Thomas More, lettres de prison, Nicholas Wilson, réconfort, conseil, conscience, Thomas d'Aquin

Éste es un estudio de las dos cartas que Thomas More escribió a Nicholas Wilson mientras los dos estaban presos en la Torre de Londres. *The Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* ilumina el papel que juegan el consuelo y el consejo en ambas. Se usará también un artículo de la *Summa theologiae* de

Tomás de Aquino para contextualizar el concepto que More tenía de la conciencia en las dos cartas.

Palabras clave: Thomas More, cartas desde la prisión, Nicholas Wilson, consuelo, consejo, conciencia, Tomás de Aquino

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Of the fourteen surviving letters of Thomas More written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, two are addressed to Nicholas Wilson<sup>1</sup>. Curiously, the first is the shortest of the seventeen, but one, and the second is the longest, but one<sup>2</sup>. These two letters offer some insights into More's thinking on counsel, comfort, and conscience, and it is this I hope to address in this essay.

To do this, however, I must briefly consider the masterpiece of the Tower writings, *The Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*<sup>3</sup>. The work purports to be a dialogue between two Hungarians. The fictional circumstance is all important. Hungary, and our two Catholic Hungarians of the dialogue, face the impending onslaught of the Turk and his religion. Hungarians had much to fear. Christians did

<sup>1</sup> Thomas More, *The Last Letters of Thomas More*, ed. Alvaro de Silva, Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 2000, p. 90-98. I will use the de Silva edition which provides in modernized spelling and punctuation the critical text as found in *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947, p. 532-38.

<sup>2</sup> The longest is the letter of Margaret Roper to Alice Alington (presumed to be by Thomas More), Rogers, number 206, p. 514-32 and de Silva, number 12, p. 72-89; the shortest is the letter to all friends, Rogers, number 204, p. 511 and de Silva, number 10, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> The critical edition is found in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, volume 12, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley, New Haven: Yale UP, 1976. References will be to the internal division of book and chapter followed by page reference (and line numbers in the case of direct quotations) in parentheses to this edition.

not fare especially well in Muslim lands. Indeed, from the vantage point of early sixteenth century Europe, one did not think of lands as "Muslim lands" as much as "Christian lands" in the hands of oppressors. The vigor of the Turk was such that his advance by both land and sea seemed unstoppable. As of 1533, the Turk had not been stopped. The successful defense of Malta and the naval victory at Lepanto are in the future.

In this circumstance, a young Hungarian Christian, Vincent, comes to his old and wise uncle Antony to seek his advice in the face of the inevitable attack of the Turk.

They discuss tribulation, which Antony aptly defines as "every such thing, as troubleth and grieveth the man, either in body or in mind, and is as it were the prick of a thorn, a bramble or a briar thrust into his flesh or into his mind"<sup>4</sup>. For young Vincent, the Turk conjures up a particularly thick patch of thorns, brambles, and briars. What these Hungarians face is impoverishment, imprisonment, pain, and death. The *Dialogue* is not, however, principally about these things, but rather, about the fear of them. Moved by such fear, one might do grave wrong. A temptation lurks here. One could remove the tribulation and its attendant fears by simply acceding to the demands of the Turk, that is, by renouncing one's Catholic faith<sup>5</sup>.

The problem of how wise Antony is to advise Vincent is worthy of Thomas More's talents. Fear is what the ancients called a passion; we might call it an emotion. By fear, we are moved to avoid or flee something we perceive to be harmful or dangerous, that is to say, a tribulation. Some dangers, however, though they threaten harm, ought not be fled, but endured. The power or virtue by which

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue* 1.16 (50/18-21).

<sup>5</sup> See I.prolog (6-7).

we endure or even attack what threatens harm is courage or fortitude. This fortitude is a virtue of the will, for it is by the will that a man is master of his passions.

Which brings us to the problem: how to help someone who is frightened. One can give him counsel, that is, advice. Advice is primarily a matter of the intellect. But fear is first of all not about the intellect, about what one is thinking, but about what one is feeling. The mastery of fear is principally a matter of the will, not the intellect. One can all too easily know what to do and fail to do it in the face of what threatens. Giving a man counsel, forming his intellect, is not sufficient to make him brave.

In the *Dialogue*, we find much counsel. In Book I especially, Antony counsels Vincent about what he should know as a Christian. He should be mindful of who Christ is and what he has accomplished. Before Christ and his accomplishments, all other things pale, including the allures of riches, good name, health, and life. The genius of the book is that it does not end here. It is not *A Dialogue of Counsel against Tribulation*. What Antony strives to give, what More strives to give, is not merely counsel but comfort. Comfort, as its Latin root suggests, is the strengthening of the will in the face of fear. Vincent does not need catechesis; he needs comfort. His problem, as is clear by the end of Book I, is not ignorance of intellect, it is weakness of will. How to give such comfort? Antony must find a way of counsel that is sufficiently rich as to become comfort.

What does Antony advise? The *Dialogue* is a big book, but we can note two essential recurring themes.

First, prayer. What the Christian in tribulation has available to him is grace. God's help is sufficient. Antony insists that, in the

end, we do not give comfort; God gives comfort, for only God truly strengthens the soul<sup>6</sup>. Our best comfort is the counsel to pray<sup>7</sup>.

Second, the need for habitual recourse to meditation on that which ultimately matters. By meditation I mean this: the exercise of both intellect and imagination with the purpose of drawing the will so that it might cling tightly to that which it should love most. We do not hold things in right proportion, because we have not truly thought, truly meditated, on what matters. For Antony, this is concretely a meditation not on something but on someone: Jesus Christ, the beloved savior who suffered so grievously for mankind. He is the model that must become the object not of infrequent and irregular consideration but of habitual meditation and love<sup>8</sup>.

The meditation on Christ points to a further object of meditation: heaven and hell. The goods of this world are little in comparison with heaven; the pains of this world little in comparison with hell<sup>9</sup>. The *Dialogue* ends famously with a meditative exercise of the imagination. Antony conjures the image of the Turk in all his ferocious numbers. But then he turns Vincent's mind to hell and its minions. And finally he turns his mind to heaven<sup>10</sup>. Before the realities of hell and heaven, the Turk loses his color, his threat. He takes on his duly proportionate smallness. The meditation moves the will: one loves God above self and fears hell above the Turk<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., I.prolog (9).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., I.2 (12-13), I.5 (18-19), I.20 (76), II.16 (155-57).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., III.1 (198), III.16 (243-44), III.20 (279-80), III.23 (291-92), III.26 (311).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., II.16 (163-64), III.23 (293-94).

<sup>10</sup> III.27 (312-20).

<sup>11</sup> In this light one can appreciate the more properly theological description of comfort given by Antony early in the *Dialogue* at I.19 (68/12-14): "but comfort Cousin is properly taken by them that take it right rather for the consolation of good hope, that men take in their heart of some good growing toward them."

We know that More himself took this advice. He had for many years meditated on Christ, especially on the passion. As he prepared for the worst, he put his meditation to paper in his treatise on the Passion. In the Tower itself he writes a meditation on the agony in the garden. He marshals intellect and imagination to keep the will fixed. How frequently in his letters he tells his correspondents that his life is but to meditate on the passion and death of Christ. The life of prayer and meditation in the tower is precisely one of seeking strength, comfort, in the face of the tribulations before him.

More was not alone in the Tower. Nicholas Wilson, doctor of divinity, was arrested for not swearing the oath and imprisoned in the Tower in the week before the arrest and imprisonment of More. A younger contemporary of Sir Thomas by perhaps ten years, he was a graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge. He had a notable ecclesiastical career: Archdeacon of Oxford, Doctor of Divinity and Master of Michaelhouse, Cambridge, and for some time chaplain and confessor to the king<sup>12</sup>.

More and Wilson were not strangers. In the matter of the king's divorce, Wilson was, with More, among those assigned to study the matter. There was a scholarly sympathy between the two men as they worked and studied the Fathers together. And in the end, Wilson was, with More, in the minority.

Now in the Tower, Wilson writes to More. His letters do not survive and what he wrote can only be surmised from More's two letters in reply. Wilson seeks counsel on two fronts: first, on some matters apparently touching on the divorce, and second, on whether to sign the oath.

<sup>12</sup>Information taken from Rogers, p. 503, n. 43.

More's two letters might well look at first glance like one more instance of Sir Thomas' carefully guarded silence; we find here the usual protestations not to reveal his mind, to follow his conscience, and not to meddle in other men's consciences. Still, these letters are not mere artful refusals; they are letters of comfort in a delicate situation. More is the older man and the older man with the reputation for wisdom; at the same time, Wilson is a priest and apparently a good one. More the layman offers spiritual comfort to a spiritual father.

The opening of the first letter is fitting indeed: "Our Lord be your comfort"<sup>13</sup>. More has heard that Wilson has promised to swear the oath and prays "our Lord give you thereof good luck." As for himself, he simply states, "I never gave any man counsel to the contrary in my days nor never used any ways to put any scruple in other folk's conscience concerning the matter." As for what he will do, he refuses to say, recalling what he had told him before their imprisonment that he would not know another man's mind nor have any other man know his. And he gives a reason: "for I would be no part taker with no man, nor of truth never I will." That is, he will not be party to any faction nor used for any faction in the politics of the matter. We ought not to underestimate this point. We see here the Thomas More who had studied so carefully the wiles of Richard III; for More, much of the ill of Richard's rise was to be found in faction and the use of the good for factional purpose. He shall not be so used.

He tells Wilson that he does what he does out of conscience and thus to swear to the oath were on peril of damnation. Tellingly he says he cannot be confident what his conscience will be

<sup>13</sup>The entire first letter is on p. 90 of *Last Letters*.

tomorrow, nor whether he shall act according to it. That he should act so rightly is, he says, a matter of grace that "hangeth in God's goodness and not in mine," for which he asks prayers and promises prayers in return. Why can he be so unsure of his conscience on the morrow? Why so unsure of himself in following it? Why the appeal for prayers? The unstated answer suggests itself. Because the pressures are great; the threats and harms he must endure are grievous. He is, in fact, afraid. For his fortitude in the face of the fear that presses him to fly he relies not on himself but on the comfort that comes from God alone. Antony's insistence on prayer and God's grace is here lived. What More describes of himself, he gives to Wilson. The first comfort is to seek comfort in God. The opening "Our Lord be your comfort" was not only a wish and exhortation, it was a statement about himself. More thus concludes the letter where he began.

All in all, not bad for a letter of only four sentences.

The second letter is much longer<sup>14</sup>. More is sorry for Wilson's troubles that come from his imprisonment: his "loss of liberty, goods, revenues of your livelihood and comfort of your friends' company." It is a page from the tribulations of *A Dialogue of Comfort*. But More is sorrier still to hear of Wilson's "vexation of mind" which has arisen from doubts that now trouble his fellow prisoner<sup>15</sup>. Wilson has apparently revealed these doubts in the hope that More will resolve them. He seeks comfort in intellectual counsel. More replies, "I am a man at this day very little meet therefore"<sup>16</sup>.

Precisely why he is not meet therefore is the subject of much of the rest of the letter. More recalls the time he and Wilson spent

<sup>14</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 91-96.

<sup>15</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

together studying and working closely on what he simply calls the "matter." He recalls the books they read and their efforts to judge impartially in that matter. With no man did he more confer on these things than with Wilson. In the midst of this recollection of their labors, More remarks, "I remember well that of those points which you call now newly to your remembrance there was none at that time forgotten"<sup>17</sup>. He recalls for Wilson how thorough was their study. He posits a hypothetical: "though I had all the points as ripe in mind now as I had then and had still all the books about me that I then had, and were as willing to meddle in the matter as any man could be, yet could you now no new thing hear of me more than you have, I ween, heard often before, nor I ween I of you neither"<sup>18</sup>. More's point is simple and direct. There is nothing new in Wilson's doubts. There is simply nothing new to be said, even if More had all the books and was on top of the matter as he once was.

But this is hypothetical and More returns to reality saying, "But now standeth it with me in far other case"<sup>19</sup>. As he could not serve the king's pleasure, he set the matter aside and would not meddle. He returned some books, and interestingly, burnt some others with the consent of their owners.

It is not, however, simply More who has no books and is far removed from the days of study. So is Wilson. If More has no true grounds for reconsideration here in the Tower, then neither does Wilson. Although More refuses to provide any such counsel, he nonetheless offers something. Why revisit these questions now? Is not the answer at the beginning of the letter: the losses arising from imprisonment? Is not the problem fear? Is not Wilson's trouble

<sup>17</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

exactly the tribulation feared by Vincent? Wilson could be free with his goods and restored to the company of friends if only he could see his way to swear the oath. He is moving in that direction but is now troubled. More knows that Wilson does not need a treatise on the canon law of marriage.

Having spoken to the question of the marriage – or rather having not spoken to it – More returns to himself and specifically to the oath. He affirms that no man knows the causes for his own refusal and so it shall remain. He recalls their earlier conversation in London that he will be no part taker but follow his conscience and leave others to follow theirs<sup>20</sup>. “And in mine own conscience,” he tells Wilson, “I cry God mercy, I find of mine own life, matters enough to think on”<sup>21</sup>. He has lived a long life and now he is examining it in his conscience. He tells Wilson that twice in the Tower he thought he was about to die and “in good faith mine heart waxed lighter with hope thereof.” But still he knows he will “have a long reckoning and great to give account of.” He continues, “but I put my trust in God and in the merits of his bitter passion, and I beseech him give me and keep me the mind to long to be out of this world and to be with him”<sup>22</sup>. More thus tells us of his days: the meditations on heaven, the examination of conscience, the hope in God’s mercy, the meditation on the passion – all so he would rightly long for heaven and despise the world. Such is precisely Antony’s advice to Vincent. Such More himself does. Such he now, ever so discreetly, advises Wilson.

Although More protests at the end, “I pray you pardon my scribbling for I cannot always so well endure to write as I might

<sup>20</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

some time,”<sup>23</sup> the letter is exquisite. More has diagnosed Wilson’s difficulty. The result is that he gives him not the counsel that he seeks but the comfort that he needs.

And what of conscience? The letters to Wilson may shed some light on this subject too. More says here, as he says so often, that he acts in accord with his own conscience and, in turn, blames no other man’s conscience.

As far as I know, More never offers a definition or description of conscience. The traditional understanding seems to hold well enough – at least in my reading of More – by which conscience is that power of the human mind to judge the moral rightness of our own actions, past, present, or future. It is our own judgement of our own specific actions.

There are two areas in which one might blame a man’s conscience. In the first, one might blame the judgement of conscience itself; that is, that the act judged in conscience to be morally good is, in fact, morally wicked. A conscience can err. In the second, one could blame a man for not having acted in accord with the judgment of his conscience. A man may judge an act wicked and yet perform it, contrary to the dictates of his conscience.

The act in question here is the signing of the oath<sup>24</sup>. More will not sign the oath as a matter of conscience. This means that he

<sup>23</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> The difficulty that informs any student of the imprisonment of Thomas More is that we do not know the form of the oath (or oaths) he was asked to swear. A note on chronology is also in order. The first Act of Succession is January to March 1534 with the issuing of Letters Patent on March 30, 1534, to appoint commissioners to administer an oath. More is imprisoned shortly thereafter on April 17. If the letters to Wilson are from the fall of 1534, they antedate the parliamentary declaration of the king as the supreme head of the Church in England and the second Act of Succession with its oath in December of 1534. I

judges the signing of the specific oath before him to be a morally wrong act<sup>25</sup>.

But having so judged according to his own conscience, why does More insist that he will not judge another man's conscience in the matter of the oath? He can mean two things. First, he refuses to judge that another man has erred in his judgment of conscience about signing the oath. Second, he refuses to judge that someone has acted against his conscience in signing the oath. But why adopt this position?

In presenting the second longer letter to Wilson, I passed over a sentence that is of interest on the point of conscience and I turn to it now. More writes to Wilson:

"Many things every man learned wotteth well there are, in which every man is at liberty without peril of damnation to think which way him list till the one part be determined for necessary to be believed by a general council, and I am not he that take upon me to define or determine of what kind or nature every thing is that the oath containeth, nor am so bold or presumptuous to blame or dispraise the conscience of other men, their truth nor their learning neither, nor I meddle with no man but of myself, nor of no man's conscience else will I meddle but of mine own"<sup>26</sup>.

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am indebted to the chronology of Seymour Baker House's essay, "Endgame: The Genesis of More's *The Sadness of Christ*", *Moreana* Vol.45, 174, p. 33-53.

<sup>25</sup> One might criticize More for his refusal to explain his judgment of conscience to others (except the king with promise of immunity from prosecution) by asking, why should one believe that he is, in fact, acting in good conscience? Why should one not think this is merely the dodge of a villain? It is for this reason that More rehearses in so many and varied ways his own history and his own character throughout the Tower letters. He insists, for example, that he has never been party to political faction. His argument is that if such has always been the case, why should it be any different now?

<sup>26</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 94-95.

More's thinking is reminiscent of an article of the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas in which he asks whether human law imposes necessity upon man in the forum of conscience<sup>27</sup>. I do not know if More knew this article, but it is apposite to our discussion. In answering whether human law imposes necessity upon man in the forum of conscience, Aquinas answers that human laws can be just or unjust. Just laws indeed bind in the forum of conscience because of the binding of divine law from which they are derived. But what of unjust human laws? He rehearses three ways in which a law may be unjust, that is, contrary to the common good: a law can be unjust from its end if it is ordered not to common utility but to the cupidity or glory of the lawgiver; it can be unjust from its form, if it imposes disproportionate burdens on the legislator's subjects; and it can be unjust if the legislator oversteps his authority. Such laws do not bind in the forum of conscience. Still, Aquinas notes, one might nonetheless submit to such laws so as to avoid scandal or political upheaval. Under these circumstances, men of good conscience could well disagree.

But there is another way in which human laws can be unjust. They can be contrary not to the human good, but to the divine good. Such are the laws of tyrants promoting idolatry or whatever else is contrary to divine law. Such laws, Aquinas maintains, are not to be observed. Here conscience is bound.

Let us return to More's words to Wilson, in which we find a similar distinction. First, there are, More says, "many things ... in which every man is at liberty without peril of damnation to think which way him list..." Many an action is such that a man is free to come to his own judgment to do it or not. Included among such

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pars prima secundae (I-II), question 96, article 4.

matters would be the unjust laws against the human good described by Aquinas. One can debate whether such are truly unjust and can debate, granting them to be unjust, whether, for the avoidance of scandal and political upheaval, one ought to submit to them anyway. Of course, once one has judged the moral good or wickedness of the act, in conscience, one is bound to follow one's conscience.

But not all matters admit of such legitimate freedom. Man may choose, More says, "till the one part be determined for necessary to be believed by a general council..." This would be an instance of Aquinas' unjust human law contrary to divine good, to which laws one cannot submit in good conscience. But how can one be certain that such law is contrary to divine good? For More, it is when the Church has spoken in council.

In the light of this distinction, known to "every man learned" with our added thomistic gloss, what might we say of the oath and its provisions? Something in the oath is, to the mind of Thomas More, at least contrary to the human good and of sufficient gravity that he thinks he cannot submit to it, even if scandal and political upheaval follow from his refusal<sup>28</sup>. Precisely in so far as this is a judgment of unjust human law contrary to the human good, More's action falls under the legitimate freedom of conscience described by Aquinas and under his own first category.

But is the oath also contrary to the divine good such that the conscience is bound to oppose it? Here More's words are well chosen and illuminating. "I am not he that take upon me to define or determine of what kind or nature every thing is that the oath containeth..." More refuses to "define or determine." This is what Church councils do. Henry may be a usurper of the Church's

<sup>28</sup> In this light one cannot help but note again More's insistence throughout his tower letters that he is no man of faction and intends no harm to the king.

authority; Thomas More will not be. This is not a refusal to speak his mind; it is a refusal to define and determine, which is the Church's alone to do.

In this light, More's description of his earlier study with Wilson of the king's marriage is notable. He speaks to their study of both sides of the matter and notes not only Fathers but also councils on both sides<sup>29</sup>. Quite simply, for More, the Church had not spoken with sufficient clarity to bind conscience. So too with the oath.

Thus More will not blame a man's conscience in the matter of the oath with regard to the actual judgment of conscience as to the moral rightness or wrongness of the act.

But what of the other way one might blame a man's conscience; namely, that he act contrary to his conscience? This is not directly addressed by More but, I am inclined to think, easily falls under his refusal to judge another man's conscience. Indeed, given that such a judgement is, in fact, a judgement of sin in the interior forum, More is especially likely to have refused such.

But there is a third possible circumstance. A man of good conscience may well not act easily against his conscience, but under sufficient duress may seek to change his initial judgement of conscience so as to be able to act still in accord with conscience. Concretely, a man who has determined that in good conscience he cannot sign the oath, may find as he contemplates the frightful consequences of the king's punishments, that he is inclined to reconsider his initial judgment. But now it will be a judgment clouded by fear. Such it seems to me is precisely the circumstance of Wilson. It looks rather like Dr. Wilson is frightened and his fear is starting to act on his conscience. He is a good man and as a good

<sup>29</sup> *Last Letters*, p. 92.



man is not likely to act directly against his conscience. The ways of the will are subtler. What he can do, in the grip of fear, is to start to rethink his position so as to force his conscience to a different judgment in the matter of the oath. Here, too, More blames no man's conscience. More understands, because he too fears. Instead, to Wilson he offers counsel and, more importantly, comfort, so that Wilson can act fully in accord with his conscience.

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