

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Study Guide



**KNIGHTS
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❖ Introduction ❖

Fred Zinnemann's 1966 film "A Man for All Seasons" reached remarkable heights; even now, 50 years after its release, the award-winning film portrays one of the most recognized depictions of St. Thomas More — a man motivated by strong convictions to remain loyal to his conscience and religious principles.

The film opens with a view of the River Thames, as the character of More is summoned before Cardinal Wolsey, the secretary of state, to discuss the affairs of King Henry VIII. England, still recovering from the civil conflict of the War of the Roses, is deeply entrenched in both local and national problems. Western Europe — for the most part unified through the Catholic Faith — is reeling following Martin Luther's confrontational break from the papacy. What had once began as a religious concern had turned into a political conflict affecting all Christendom.

England was no exception. In 1521, nearly 10 years before the events of the film take place, Henry VIII himself published a tract in defense of the papacy which responded to Luther's attacks, earning him the title "Defender of the Faith." Henry's position on papal authority, of course, quickly changed. Infatuated with the young Anne Boleyn, Henry wished to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon. First married to Henry's elder brother Arthur, Catherine's successive marriage to Henry maintained England's connection to the growing Spanish Empire and stabilized the Tudor's claim to the English throne.

Henry, of course, also wanted a male heir — an heir whose legitimacy was unquestionable, who would further stabilize the monarchy. With the Spanish alliance growing distasteful and Catherine's inability to give Henry a healthy son becoming more apparent, Henry argued that his marriage to Catherine was unlawful, and that he should, by right, be free to marry Anne.

Well-versed in Catholic law, Henry knew that a simple divorce, or separation, was not sufficient if he wished to remarry. He would have to get an annulment — which, at that time, could only be granted directly by the pope — declaring that he was never legitimately married to Catherine.

It fell to Wolsey, as Henry's secretary of state, to persuade Rome on the issue, and it is with this that the film begins. Wolsey's opening lines delve immediately into religious-political concerns, concerns which, as the play continues, bear strong resemble to those of the present day. The character of Thomas More speaks in ways appropriate for his times, but his words and actions show him to be, as the title suggests, truly "A Man for All Seasons."

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, which, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, is "the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God, whose voice echoes within them" (Gaudium et Spes, 16). 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 venerated as an imperishable example of moral integrity.

— St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Saint Thomas More
Patron of Statesmen and Politicians



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

William Roper: So, now you give the devil the benefit of law!

Sir Thomas More: Yes! What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the devil?

William Roper: Yes, I'd cut down every law in England to do that!

Sir Thomas More: Oh? And when the last law was down, and the devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down, and you're just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!

The Duke of Norfolk: Oh confound all this. I'm not a scholar, I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not but dammit, Thomas, look at these names! Why can't you do as I did and come with us, for fellowship!

Sir Thomas More: And when we die, and you are sent to heaven for doing your conscience, and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?

Sir Thomas More: Since the court has determined to condemn me, God knoweth how, I will now discharge my mind concerning the indictment and the king's title. The indictment is grounded in an act of Parliament which is directly repugnant to the law of God, and his Holy Church, the supreme government of which no temporal person may by any law presume to take upon him. This was granted by the mouth of our Savior, Christ himself, to St. Peter and the bishops of Rome whilst he lived and was personally present here on earth. It is, therefore, insufficient in law to charge any Christian to obey it.

Sir Thomas More: I am the king's true subject, and I pray for him and all the realm. I do none harm. I say none harm. I think none harm. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, then in good faith, I long not to live.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. **"I think that when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties, they lead their country by a short route to chaos."** — Sir Thomas More

What is conscience? How is conscience tied to free will? Should the law allow room for one to act according to his conscience? Is a law just if it does not allow for a freedom of conscience?

2. **More argues that it is his full person, his very being, that is being led by his convictions. He must be true to himself as a Catholic man, led by the God-given authority of the Church.**

Should our understanding of morality (i.e., the moral laws of God) affect our lives in this way? Is morality simply a gesture, or should it become part of our entire being?

3. **During the trial, More and Cromwell discuss the nature of More's silence regarding Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn. More ends the exchange, saying, "The world must construe according to its wits; this court must construe according to the law."**

Could silence be an option for Catholic politicians, or could they be condoning unjust/wrong laws through their silence? Should politicians be silent regarding their personal convictions on various political issues?

4. In 1935, 400 years after More's death, Thomas More was canonized by Pope Pius XI.

Why is he considered saintly by the Catholic Church? Was it because he went beyond human politics, conforming instead to what he understood as God's truth? Can More rightly be considered a martyr, as he died for this truth?

5. G. K Chesterton wrote in 1929 that “Thomas More is more important at this moment than at any moment since his death, even perhaps the great moment of his dying; but he is not quite so important as he will be in about a hundred years time. He may come to be counted the greatest Englishman, or at least the greatest historical character in English history. For he was above all things historic; he represented at once a type, a turning point and an ultimate destiny. If there had not happened to be that particular man at that particular moment, the whole of history would have been different.”

Do you agree with Chesterton regarding More's importance in history, and his effect upon today's society?

6. Some consider More a “plaster saint” — the perfect example of blind loyalty to the political authority of the Catholic Church. Others, recognizing that More stood up to the egotistical Henry, admire him for his abilities to play the complex political role of a Catholic politician; his name was even added in 1980 to the Church of England's Calendar of Saints and Heroes.

How might More, as portrayed by Paul Scofield in the film, be considered “saintly” by non-Catholics?

7. In 2000, Pope John Paul II declared More to be the patron of statesmen and politicians.

Despite the fact the More was responding to the political issues of the 16th century, how might More be an example to politicians today? He considered himself a loyal subject in a monarchy; is his behavior relevant to statesmen in other forms of government?

8. One of More's contemporaries, Robert Whittinton, said this of More: “More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons.”

Robert Bolt, the author of the original play, and later the film's screenwriter, chose the title from Whittinton's description. Do you think it an appropriate description for the saint?

9. The film centers on More's refusal to declare Henry's marriage to Anne as legitimate, “It is not for the Supremacy that you have sought my blood, but because I would not bend to the marriage!”

How might one consider the depiction of marriage in the film? Is it ultimately portrayed as something sacred under the law of God, as More argues, or is portrayed as something easily changed according to a legal declaration? How do the married characters contribute to this depiction?

10. In his last conversation with his daughter Meg, Thomas More declares that his position on the Oath of Supremacy is not simply “a matter of reason. Finally, it's a matter of love.”

How does More, an intellectual saint known for his witticism and great strength of character, act out of love? Is it love that makes a saint? And, ultimately, a trustworthy and sincere politician?