

2026 History Essay Contest

School 7/8th Grade Winner

When Silence Speaks: The Courage of Sir Thomas More

By Seraphine Alquaddoomi, Grade 8
Camino School
Laguna Woods, California

The stained glass windows of Westminster hall, the source and summit of English law, cast their light upon a stone floor being crossed by a prisoner who had once strode there as his majesty's most trusted adviser. Then, he had been dressed in fine velvet robes. Now he wore a coarse linen. Nevertheless, the ill treatment of months of confinement had not weakened his conscience and courage.

The prisoner approached a hostile prosecutor and a bench of stern judges. The surrounding hall was packed with spectators, murmuring with excited and inquisitive expectation.

All eyes were on Sir Thomas More.

Just months before, More had been Chancellor of the realm, the highest-ranking minister of the king. He was a leading thinker of the English Renaissance, having written books on philosophy and religion. He personally educated his daughter to a level of excellence rarely seen among even men. He had attained great wealth as a leading lawyer. All this he gave up rather than betraying his conscience and was in that hall condemned to death by men once thought his friends.

No man in that crowded hall could claim to truly know him. They knew the public servant, the orator, the author whose pen had once danced with wit and learning. Few knew the man who rose before

dawn to pray, who wore a hair shirt beneath his garments, who laughed with his children and tested their minds as sharply as he tested his own. Even when appointed high chancellor, he maintained his humility. Few understood the “iron beneath that gentleness”—the conscience that would not bend, not even for a king.

This king was none other than the infamous Henry VIII, known for his excessive number of marriages. At the time, he was seeking to annul his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and to remarry to Anne Boleyn (which, ironically, did not last more than a few years). In their youth, Thomas More and King Henry were good friends. They had many discussions about politics, world news, and especially faith.

That was where their convictions clashed.

Once More realized the King was committed to the annulment, he deliberately transitioned away from his royal duties. More wanted nothing to do with the king’s new marriage, but Henry became obsessed with More’s approval. He created an oath of succession, presented to all subjects across the country, regardless of beliefs or opinions, that required subjects and statesmen alike to swear acceptance of both his marriage to Anne Boleyn and to their children— the future Elizabeth I. The punishment for defying would be death. More was caught.

He could not, in good faith, swear to something he believed to be immoral, yet he understood the danger of refusal. When the oath was presented to him, More did not openly denounce the king’s remarriage; instead, he remained silent, hoping that his silence might spare him from condemnation. But silence, in this case, was not enough.

And so Thomas More was convicted of high treason and sentenced to death— but not because he had declared anything openly. Rather, one of his former students was bribed and brought to court to testify against his teacher, now an attorney of Wales, Richard Rich. Perjury was what killed More – and once condemned, he spoke his mind.

And yet, as history tells us, More’s objection did not stop the king from remarrying. The Church was separated and former friends now became enemies; Papists and Royalists looked upon each other as if they had never been one great Church. English Catholics lived in fear of the king’s sentences.

So did Thomas More genuinely have an influence?

He did indeed have an influence: that was what killed him. His influence was ironically demonstrated by the very ones who killed him: “Is there a man in this court.. Is there a man in this country.. who does not know the opinion of Sir Thomas More?” Despite their efforts to nullify the efforts of his refusal, he has never been forgotten. And today, 500 years later, at a time when the Anglican church is now failing in numbers of adherence, and flailing into doctrinal incoherence, he is still remembered. His words, no, his *silence* reverberates to this day, ripples of water that spread outward from a single conscience, crossing centuries and inspiring ideals of justice, faith, and the cost of integrity throughout history. His silence reverberates more than any other sound.

His memory was sustained by his children, encouraged by their father’s undying courage and faith. His testimony was honored by English Catholics who now understood that their faith could be deadly. His legacy was enshrined upon his canonization by Pope Pius XI in 1935, in the midst of political chaos and confusion in the time preceding World War II.

On the morning of his execution, Sir Thomas More was led to the scaffold with serenity. His steps were slow but steady, each one deliberate, his expression calm and resolute. He forgave his executioner and bent his knee in prayer. This was a man who loved his neighbor. This was a man who loved his country. This was a man who loved his enemy.

Kneeling with quiet dignity, he lifted his voice one last time:

“I die the King’s good servant—and God’s first.”

Bibliography:

Ackroyd, Peter. *The Life of Thomas More*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1999.

Berglar, Peter. *Thomas More: A Lonely Voice against the Power of the State*. Scepter Publishers, 2010.

Wegemer, Gerard B. *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage*. Scepter Publishers, 1995.

Wegemer, Gerard B., ed. *Thomas More Studies*, <http://www.thomasmorestudies.org>, March 22 2026.

Zinneman, Fred. *A Man for All Seasons*, Columbia Pictures, 1966.