

**“Conscience and Leadership in the Lives of
Saints Thomas More and John Fisher”**

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It is good to be with you to deliver the 2023 Chelsea Lecture here at Chelsea Academy. While some people may associate the name Chelsea with an English professional football – or as we Americans would say, soccer – club based in Fulham, West London, I am sure all of you here know that the Chelsea that really matters was the home of Sir Thomas More and his family. The Chelsea Lecture is described as an annual presentation dedicated to the life, faith, and thought of Saint Thomas More and the spirit and culture that he nurtured in his home and among his friends. So, this evening, in addition to talking about Saint Thomas More, I will also talk about one of his friends. He was a contemporary of Thomas More, and like his famous counterpart, this man is also a model for every Catholic public servant. He is also a model for Catholic bishops and priests. His name is Saint John Fisher.

The title I have given to this 2023 Chelsea Lecture is “Conscience and Leadership in the Lives of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher.” I wish to begin by telling you how Saints Thomas More and John Fisher came to be my personal patron saints.

The date was August 24, 1952, the most important day of my life. Coming just nineteen days after I was born into this world, it was the day on which I was baptized and thereby was born again as an adopted son of God. My parents had me baptized with the names Thomas John. I once asked my parents why they named me Thomas John. My middle name, John, made sense, since my father and my grandfather were named John. But where did the name Thomas come from? My parents gave no profound or historical explanation, saying simply that they liked the name Thomas and they wanted to give me a name that no one else in the family had.

Over the years, I initially presumed that my patron saint was Saint Thomas the Apostle, the first saint to bear that name. As I progressed through my seminary studies, I began to look to Saint Thomas Aquinas for his intercession to help me with my academic pursuits. Later, after I

graduated law school and was admitted to the Illinois bar, I began to look more to Saint Thomas More, patron saint of lawyers. When I was named Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1992, Saint Thomas More took on added significance for me since he had served as Lord High Chancellor of England from 1529 to 1532.

Then in 2010 when I was named Bishop of Springfield in Illinois, I asked my Metropolitan Archbishop, the late Francis Cardinal George, what date he was available for him to come to Springfield for my Installation Mass. He looked at his calendar and said that June 22nd would be good for him. Of course, June 22nd is the Memorial of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher. I said that would be perfect! I would be installed as a bishop on the feast day of the patron saint of lawyers as well as that of a renowned bishop, both of whom died as martyrs.

Immediately it became clear to me that this was all in God's plan. Although my parents did not fully understand it at the time, on the day of my baptism they were setting me on a lifetime journey, naming me Thomas John, that would lead to the day of my installation as a diocesan bishop on

the Memorial of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher. Since that time, I have asked the priests of my diocese when celebrating Mass to mention both my first name and my middle name at that point in the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass when they pray for “our bishop, Thomas John.” I might also add that I have the rare distinction of my patronal names day of both my first and middle names occurring on the same day, unless you are named Peter Paul, Basil Gregory, Timothy Titus, Cyril Methodius, Perpetua Felicity, Philip James, Nereus Achilleus, Marcellinus Peter, Pontian Hippolytus, Cornelius Cyprian, Simon Jude, or Cosmas and Damian! Of course, you really hit the jackpot if your first name, middle name, and Confirmation name are some combination of Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael!

Conscience in the Lives of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher

Given my patron saints, you might not be surprised to learn that my favorite movie of all time is the 1966 classic, “A Man for All Seasons,” which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, about the life of Saint Thomas More, played by the British actor Paul Scofield. The screenplay was written by Robert Bolt. In one particularly pertinent scene as it relates to the theme

of my topic for this Chelsea lecture, Thomas More is having a conversation with his predecessor as Lord High Chancellor, His Eminence Thomas Cardinal Wolsey, the Archbishop of York. Cardinal Wolsey is seeking More's help in drafting a letter to the Holy See regarding the desire of King Henry VIII to divorce the Queen, Catherine of Aragon, so that he could marry Anne Boleyn.

Challenging More's reluctance to help, Wolsey says, "You're a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on, without that horrible moral squint, with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman. . . . Now explain how you as Councilor of England can obstruct those measures for the sake of your own, private, conscience."

Thomas responds, "Well . . . I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties . . . they lead their country by a short route to chaos."¹ The implication is that conscience, by contrast, will save the world!

In another scene from "A Man for All Seasons," the author Robert Bolt has Sir Thomas More describing the inviolability of one's personal

conscience by telling the Duke of Norfolk, “What matters is not that it’s true, but that I believe it; or no, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it.”

According to Judge Robert J. Conrad, Jr., in his outstanding book entitled, *John Fisher and Thomas More: Keeping Their Souls While Losing Their Heads*, Bolt is portraying conscience as a “possession of self,” quoting Bolt as saying that More was a “hero of selfhood” who had an adamant sense of his own self.”² Conrad disagrees. He says, “I see More (and Fisher) differently. They were not self-confident but ‘Christ-confident.’ They were not adamant followers of self-will but servants of the one true God who spoke through his Word and his Church. Their strength of conviction was rooted in their shared belief that God was truth and that his Church was a truth-telling institution.”³

Returning to the scene in which the Duke of Norfolk is trying to persuade Sir Thomas More to sign the Succession to the Crown Act of 1534, Norfolk says, “Oh, confound all this. ... I’m not a scholar, as Master Cromwell never tires of pointing out, and frankly, I don’t know whether the [King’s] marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those

names. ... You know those men! Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?"

More responds pointedly: "And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me – for 'fellowship'?"

"Conscience" is a word that means different things to different people. To some, following one's conscience means to do as one pleases, as one sees fit; to others, following one's conscience is to have the moral and political freedom to please God by what he or she does in life, to oneself and one's neighbors, not simply as one might like or as one would prefer, but as one ought to do.

The word "conscience" comes from two Latin words, "co-" (which means "together" or "with") and "science" (which means to have knowledge about something). Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. Conscience does not act in isolation on some sort of personal or individual intuition disconnected from someone or

something else. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God's knowledge and the Church's teaching about right or wrong. So those who invoke "conscience" to justify their rejection of the natural moral law or divine law as taught by the Catholic Church are saying that they have chosen to follow the thinking, knowledge and values of someone or something other than the Pope or the Catholic Church.

Like Thomas More, John Fisher lived and died during England's changeover from Catholicism to Protestantism. He served as the Bishop of Rochester, where I celebrated Mass in the summer of 2019 at his old Cathedral during a trip to England for some lectures that I was asked to give at the University of Oxford. Like Thomas More, John Fisher refused to assent to Henry VIII's divorce and declaration of himself as the head of the Church. He stayed true to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

The most striking demonstration of standing up for the truth of one's conscience in the face not only of enormous peer pressure but also the whole weight of civil authority is recounted by Judge Conrad in his book where he describes this scene which took place in 1529 in the Great Hall of the

Blackfriars in London. The occasion was the convening of a papal commission authorized to conduct an inquiry and come to a decision based on the evidence submitted on the question of the King's marriage. The papal legates were Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Seated to the legates' right were King Henry VIII and Queen Catherine. The Queen's counsel, Bishop Fisher, sat nearby. The Archbishop of Canterbury was also present along with the other bishops of the realm. Conrad's narration of the scene is riveting, and so is worth quoting at length:

King Henry told the legates that he had placed his doubts before all the bishops of the realm. And you know what? Not one of them disagreed. The king: "And so I did of all of you, my lords, to the which you have all granted by writing under all your seals, the which I have here to show [holding up the affidavits]." The archbishop of Canterbury responds, "That is truth if it pleases your highness. I doubt not but all my brethren here present will affirm the same."

There was a pause while the king waited for the unspoken assent of the bishops. In the silence, however, one voice rang out clearly from the queen's benches: "No sir, not I. You have not my consent thereto."

The king turned on Bishop Fisher in anger and showed him an affidavit with seals. "Look here upon this. Is not this your hand and seal?"

"No, forsooth, sir, it is not my hand nor seal," Fisher answered confidently.

The king then wheeled around on the archbishop of Canterbury. "Sir, how say you? Is this not his hand and seal?"

The archbishop looks down hesitatingly, then confirms the king's speculation, only to be confronted by Bishop Fisher. "That is not so, for indeed you were in hand with me to have both my hand and seal, as other of my lords had already done, but then I said to you that I would never consent to no such act for it were much against my conscience, nor my hand and seal should never be seen at any such instrument (God willing)."

The archbishop, looking for a way out, counters, "You say truth, such words as you had unto me, but at the last you were fully persuaded that I should for you subscribe your name and put to a seal myself, and you would allow the same."

But Fisher confronts all the power in the room assembled against him and without flinching says, "All which words and matter under your correction, my lord, and supportation of this noble audience, there is nothing more untrue."

The tension in the great hall was palpable. The archbishop did not attempt to answer. Nor did the king attempt to defend him. Instead, he passed the matter over with what amounted to an admission of the truth of what Fisher had said: "It shall make no matter. We will not stand with you in argument herein, for you are but one man."

*"For you are but one man."*⁴

We can learn much from three key phrases in this narrative. First, when the king asserts that he has the assent of all the bishops, the easy thing to do would have been for Bishop John Fisher to remain silent. Just imagine the courage, fortitude, and strength of conviction for Bishop Fisher to stand up before his king and all his brother bishops, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, and proclaim, "No sir, not I. You have not my consent thereto."

Then, Bishop Fisher states clearly and succinctly why he cannot give his consent to the king's demands: "For it was much against my conscience."

The king's pithy response is also worth noting: "You are but one man."

How often do we talk ourselves out of doing the right things by telling ourselves, "I am just one person. What difference could I make?" Indeed,

Bishop Fisher's heroic stance did not prevent the king from doing what he wanted, and the Church of England with the monarch as its head persists to this day. But long after the Church of England disappears what will last is the truth to which Bishop John Fisher gave witness. The power of this witness can be seen in the fact that the name of John Fisher is remembered and venerated today as a saint, while the names of his fellow bishops who wavered out of fickleness have long been forgotten in ignominy.

Both Thomas More and John Fisher lost their lives for holding fast to the truth. They joined the company of saints through the martyr's door because they remained steadfast in the truth that Our Lord taught about the indissolubility of marriage. Why does that matter? Why did they not simply vacillate under pressure and disregard this vexing matter of the truth as Pontius Pilate found it so easy to do?

Saint Thomas More explained why very succinctly when he was summoned to Lambeth Palace to take the oath attendant to the Act of Succession. Refusing to take the oath, Thomas More said, "My purpose is not to put any fault in the Act or any man that made it, or the oath or any

man that swears it, nor to condemn the conscience of any other man. But as for myself in good faith my conscience so moves me in the matter, that though I will not deny to swear to the succession, yet unto the oath that is here offered to me, I cannot swear without the jeopardizing of my soul to perpetual damnation.”⁵

There you have it: the choice in the way we lead our lives is between perpetual damnation and eternal salvation. It was this clarity of vision and confidence of conviction that led John Fisher on the day of his execution to dress up in his finest clothes and tell his servant that this was his marriage day and “it behooves us therefore to dress for the solemnity of that marriage.”⁶ Similarly, to the very end, Thomas More keeps his priorities straight, as attested by his famous last words before his beheading, “I die the King’s good servant, and God’s first.”⁷

Leadership in the Lives of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher

I wish now to turn our attention to the topic of leadership in the lives of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher. I have spent a lot of time studying leadership formally and thinking about it informally. My formal education

in leadership began when I was a young priest (33 years old) and was accepted as a fellow in Leadership Greater Chicago, having been nominated for this fellowship by my Archbishop, the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. More recently, as a bishop, I earned an MBA degree at the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. In my MBA classes, we had courses like leadership decision-making and leadership communication. Last year, I began teaching a course on leadership in organizations in the MBA program at the Oakley School of Business of Quincy University, a Catholic university sponsored by the Franciscan Friars in my diocese.

There are many schools of thought and different theories about the qualities of a good leader, often focusing, as they should, on virtues, values, character, and integrity. But what I am often looking for, and rarely find, is a discussion of the relationship between leading and following.

By definition, leading implies that someone will be following. But how do you get someone to follow you? What if you try to lead, but no one follows? Are you still a leader? Saint John Fisher was alone among the bishops of his time to remain faithful to the true Church rather than

surrender to the order of the King demanding obeisance to his claim to be the supreme head of the Church of England. Yet, Saint John Fisher did not persuade any of his colleagues to follow him. Did that mean he failed as a leader? Perhaps that was not his fault as much as it was the timidity and cowardice of his brother bishops.

Leaders sometimes need to be outliers, doing what is right, but taking the risk that no one will follow, and you will be left to stand alone. I have had that experience of feeling left out on a limb at times following my decrees and statements about same-sex marriage and after telling pro-abortion Catholic politicians not to go to Holy Communion.

At other times, perhaps we become accidental leaders, not setting out to try to gain followers, but inspiring others to follow a path that they admire or a goal that they share. President Abraham Lincoln, Springfield's most famous citizen, whom I and many others consider to be our nation's greatest President, often remarked that events shaped him more than he shaped events.

When it comes to leadership in the life of Bishop John Fisher, my source of information is nothing like the accessible, enjoyable movie that tells the story of Thomas More's life. In fact, it is the polar opposite of *A Man For All Seasons*. It's an article I found in a little-known periodical, *The Catholic Social Science Review*, entitled: "Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher."⁸

The article's authors undertook a unique study of John Fisher's life. They analyzed his actions in light of the most prominent secular leadership model, which is generally known as the "Five Exemplary Practices." They also looked at his life through the prism of four Catholic leadership principles. This approach led them to an important conclusion: Saint John Fisher is an exemplar of both secular *and* spiritual leadership. Their essay relies heavily on one of the most popular secular models of leadership, known as K&P, which stands for its authors, Kouzes and Posner. It is featured in the popular book, *The Leadership Challenge*.

The K&P model is based on empirical research going back many years. After reviewing the literature and conducting their own studies, the authors discovered five main traits that define successful leaders. They are:

- o Model the Way
- o Inspire a Shared Vision
- o Challenge the Process
- o Enable Others to Act
- o Encourage the Heart

Each of these principles is an essential component of good leadership. Each of them can be found in Saint John Fisher's life. The first and perhaps the most important of the five main traits that define successful leaders is to "Model the Way" -- which is precisely what Saint John Fisher did. Throughout his life, he showed the path for others to follow. And not only did he set the example; he also clarified the values that guided his actions -- the values taught by the Catholic Church.

He modeled the way by refusing to back down from what he knew was right. When the King of England demanded the acceptance of his

schismatic and immoral views, John Fisher refused. He continued to preach and teach the truth, without ever compromising the values that he knew were right.

Yet modeling the way leads is directly related to the second principle: Inspiring a shared vision. Setting an example for others helps bring them along. Sure enough, John Fisher set an example that eventually caused other Catholics to join him in remaining faithful to the Catholic faith. They knew what they were doing would be costly. But the saint's leadership convinced them it was worth it.

As leaders in your fields, you are called to this same mission. Christ asks us to model the way, which is to live a rightly ordered life. So does He ask us to inspire a shared vision, evangelizing those around us. Of course, that process looks different for each of us. But it is not something we can ignore.

It is worth asking yourselves, on a daily basis: Am I modeling the way? Am I inspiring a shared vision? Simply asking these questions can transform our own witness in the workplace.

When asked to do something wrong on behalf of a client, a customer, or even your boss, you will know the right answer. When asked about your faith, you will give an answer that opens others' hearts to the truth. There are countless ways for you to set an example and engage others.

Admittedly, modeling the way is never easy. Sometimes it may even clash with the demands placed upon you by work and the secular world. Once again, John Fisher shows the path forward.

When Henry VIII demanded his allegiance, Fisher could easily have assented and improved his own career. He probably would have risen to the top of the hierarchy in England before too long. Yet he did not. He knew well the Scripture Verse: What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?⁹

The other three principles of sound secular leadership are: Challenging the Process, Enabling Others to Act, and Encouraging the Heart.

Challenging the Process is at the center of Christian witness. As followers of the Risen Savior, we stand apart from all that society teaches. We challenge the conventional wisdom of the day, because we have access

to an eternal wisdom. This should cause us to point out error, and seek to align the world around us with the truth.

John Fisher challenged the process throughout his career. He constantly looked for opportunities to bring the practices of the day back in line with Catholic teaching. He reformed the monasteries under his control. He also took risks, knowing that the times required bold action. Nothing was more risky than challenging Henry VIII. Yet Saint John Fisher did it anyway.

The fourth leadership principle is to “Enable Others to Act.” The K&P model says that consists of “fostering collaboration” and “strengthening others.” Fisher did both, in spades. He worked to gain the respect of others and help them do the right thing. He also strengthened those around him by consistently and clearly reminding them of God’s grace and love. Such actions gave others the confidence they needed to follow the Christian truth.

Finally, John Fisher encouraged the heart, which is the fifth and final leadership principle. Amidst all the chaos and crisis that was going on around him, he reminded people of where their true hope lies: The faith. By

encouraging others with the light of the Gospel and the grace of God, he helped keep the Catholic faith alive in England, well after his martyrdom.

Remember: These are secular leadership principles. Yet Saint John Fisher shows us that we can easily apply them to spiritual matters. Indeed, he shows that these leadership principles can be applied to any endeavor. This bears directly on all of us here today.

What does it look like in your careers to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart? Truth be told, I do not have the specific answer for you. But I am certain that there is an answer, but you will need to look into your heart and soul to find it.

Finding it is up to you. It will help if you avail yourselves of the Sacraments as often as you can. God's grace will give you the strength to chart a faithful course in your daily life, just as it did with Saints Thomas More and John Fisher. They led well because they loved God well. The same can be true of all of you. Of course, the Sacraments help you practice and

perfect the spiritual qualities of leadership. Saints Thomas More and John Fisher again show the way.

The analysis of John Fisher's life also showed that his life was infused with the defining characteristics of *Christian* leadership. The article I referenced also refers to four specific spiritual leadership principles. The first of these is heroic courage. Bishop John Fisher stood strong against the winds of his day because he stood on a rock that could not be moved. This is called heroic courage, which is also one of the cardinal virtues, coming from the Latin word *cardo*, which means *hinge*. All of the other virtues hinge on practicing the cardinal virtues.

The truth of the matter is that leadership is tough. It confronts you with hard choices and often leads to harsh consequences. John Fisher certainly knew this. He faced a King and a culture that rejected the truth and all who adhered to it. Yet, he refused to back down from what he knew was right. It would have been easier to give up the fight and go along with the flow -- but that is not the nature of leadership. In Psalm 137, we hear the words, "Let my tongue be silenced if I ever forget you." John Fisher never forgot the

teachings of Christ and His Church. He courageously proclaimed the truth in all that he did, knowing full well what it could cost him. So do all true leaders: They take a stand, regardless of the consequences.

Now, I admit: Heroic courage is not something we can easily summon. But God, in his infinite mercy, has offered us help. The Sacraments, especially Penance and Holy Communion, are a bottomless well of grace that constantly brings forth courage. They re-align us and remind us of who we are and what we aspire to be, giving us the strength to choose right over wrong and good over evil. Frequent contact with the Sacraments, therefore, is essential for all who wish to hold fast to the faith amidst the storms of our time.

The other three principles of spiritual leadership are:

- o Personal Humility
- o Ongoing Repentance
- o Active Presence

Personal humility is essential for all leaders. Despite his obvious talents, Saint John Fisher never sought to aggrandize himself. To the

contrary: He turned down transfers to wealthier and bigger dioceses and was reluctant to accept the Cardinal's hat, which the Pope bestowed on him shortly before his death. When he did accept it, he adopted an attitude of the utmost humility.

Ongoing repentance is the next principle of spiritual leadership. This was a constant theme of Fisher's homilies and writings, and for good reason. He knew that repentance led to grace, and grace led to heaven. He wanted to walk that path himself, and to help those around him to do the same. My counsel to you is to repent early and often.

The final principle is active presence. Fisher made a point to fulfill his obligations with the utmost attention. He could have divided himself between a thousand different things -- indeed, many asked him to do just that. Yet he focused on the areas to which he knew he was called, giving them his full and undivided attention. He was a better leader for it.

John Fisher and Thomas More stood for the truth when it was hardest. They did so when the criticism was greatest. We know, of course, that it cost

them their lives. Yet they gladly took that path because they knew it was the right one.

You are called to follow in their footsteps. No, you will not necessarily have to give UP your life. But Christ still demands that you give OF your life. To be a Christian is to serve and sacrifice in your daily walk. It means standing up to the winds and whims of the present age. It means living intentionally, rooted in the faith.

This is no easy task. The challenges we face our growing, not shrinking. The culture is urging us to abandon what we believe. Heroic courage is the antidote. It springs from our trust in God, and it is strengthened when we turn to God's grace. I know that I need that courage in my own position. I have no doubt that you do, too.

Nearly four hundred years after the deaths of Sir Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher and five years before their canonization, G.K. Chesterton remarked prophetically, "Blessed 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 a hundred

years.”¹⁰ He said that in 1929. One hundred years from then is less than six years from now! Yes, we need the example, inspiration, and saintly intercession of Saint Thomas More now more than ever!

Saint John Fisher once said, “A good man is not a perfect man; a good man is an honest man, faithful and unhesitatingly responsive to the voice of God in his life.” These words describe what all of you can be. They are what all of you must be. And I trust that they are what all of you will be, as Catholic leaders, whether in the Church or in the world.

You carry a burden on your shoulders, but you do not carry it alone. Your burden is the cross, and you share it with the Lord. The Triune God, our Blessed Mother, and all the Saints are there to guide you, and help you become the faithful leader you were born to be.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

- ¹ Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1960), pp. 11 and 13.
- ² Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More: Keeping Their Souls While Losing Their Heads* (Gastonia, North Carolina: TAN Books, 2021), p. 18, quoting Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, p. vii.
- ³ Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, p. 18.
- ⁴ Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, pp. 13-14.
- ⁵ William Roper, *The Mirror of Vertue in Worldly Greatness or the Life of Sir Thomas More* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), pp. 105-106; quoted in Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, p. 17.
- ⁶ Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, pp. 42 and 132.
- ⁷ Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, p. 131.
- ⁸ Fr. Ross Chamberland, O.F.M. and Guillermo Montes, "Canonized Leadership: A Contemporary Leadership Study of Saint John Fisher, Scholar, Bishop, and Martyr," *The Catholic Social Science Review* 23 (2018): 237-249.
- ⁹ Cf., Matthew 16:26 and Mark 8:36.
- ¹⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *The Fame of Blessed Thomas More* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929), p. 63; quoted in Robert J. Conrad, Jr., *John Fisher and Thomas More*, p. 4.