Introduction

All suffering is profitable. Who would believe such a statement today? Or any other day, for that matter? The learned and witty Saint Thomas More did, and so he argues in this book, which many consider his masterpiece. But even if such a statement could be believed, how could an ordinary human being live consistently by it? In the way in which it addresses this question, More's Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation reveals its enduring power and appeal.

Good conversation—dialogue—is among the deepest of all human needs, especially in times of suffering. Without it, we could never achieve self-knowledge or happiness or objectivity about our own situation or our own good. Instead, we would become absorbed in what More often calls "foolish fantasies." The best conversations—which include, of course, conversations with God—help liberate us from illusions that distort reality in both tragic and comic ways, ways that are made memorable in this work, which contains the largest selection of Saint Thomas More's most famous humorous stories.

A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation is a remarkable dramatization of good conversation in action. It is a conversation about a difficult and perplexing topic that affects everyone: suffering. And not just any kind of suffering, but tribulation: that kind of suffering which comes with the impact of a tribulum, a threshing-sledge. This conversation is also about comfort (cum forte: "with courage"). Not only does it explain what courage is, but it also shows how courageous self-mastery can be achieved in and through suffering of all kinds.

In the fictional frame of the *Dialogue*, wise old Anthony, on his deathbed, is approached by his young and rich nephew Vincent, who is crippled by fear and uncertainty and who

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comes for the advice needed to face the great hardships that loom ahead. The medicine that Anthony skillfully administers to Vincent is needed by every friend, by every parent and grandparent, and by everyone else who wants to help anyone (including oneself) in a profound and lasting manner. What Anthony does with apparent ease, few can do, since few have sought the wisdom that Anthony's artful conversation presupposes.

In writing this book, Sir Thomas More, near the end of his own life, chose as its literary form the Socratic dialogue: the form that arguably provides the greatest access to the mind and soul of another, but a form that demands the closest attention from the reader. A master of this form, Sir Thomas rewards his careful reader with startling revelations about the dynamics of fortifying the human soul in its times of greatest agony.

The setting and characters of the *Dialogue* lightly veil More's own situation and character as he awaited execution for having countered the will of King Henry VIII. Just as More's daughter Margaret visited him and asked for help to bear the crushing burdens that then faced their family, so young Vincent visits old Anthony. (On the lighter side, however, More also has these characters relate several hilarious husband-and-wife interchanges that actually took place between him and his wife, Dame Alice.)

When Vincent first goes to Anthony, he does not have the ability to bear the difficulties that lie ahead: he is an everyman character who goes to the wisest and best person he knows to get advice about his predicament. The result is three heartwarming and often humorous conversations that show how Anthony skillfully brings about a transformation in his goodhearted but inexperienced nephew, a transformation from one almost paralyzed by fear to one who is able to conquer what lies ahead: hence the name Vincent (from *vincere*, meaning "to conquer"). In the way in which he dramatizes this self-conquest, Sir Thomas More has left a legacy of wisdom that is

as valuable to us today as it was to his family and friends of five hundred years ago.

More wrote the *Dialogue of Comfort* while imprisoned in the Tower of London. This time was the only period of leisure he ever had after his earliest days in King Henry's service. The one previous time was twenty years earlier, when he had been forced by state duties to stay abroad without his family; during that time of forced inactivity, he wrote his best-known work, *Utopia*. But those next twenty years found More so involved in the complexities of political life—during this period of revolutionary change in both church and state—that any writing he did was, as he said in one of his letters, with time "stolen from eating and from sleep." Were it not for the unjust imprisonment that occurred when he was fifty-seven, we would not have this masterpiece of good counsel.

Oddly enough, More's *Utopia*, written in Latin and with puns in Greek, has long been more accessible than the *Dialogue of Comfort*, which was written in English—but in a pre-Shakespearean English that most modern readers have found virtually impossible to read. Therefore, we have been in the unusual situation where good translations of *Utopia* have long existed, while readable versions of the *Dialogue of Comfort* have not.

Especially in this light, students of Thomas More will welcome this new edition from Scepter Publishers because it will finally give wide access to the wisdom and humor contained in one of More's greatest works. Those who would like to refer to the original text can consult volume 12 of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, published by Yale University Press. This critical edition is the best available, and it provides a wealth of notes and commentary.

This new edition, prepared by Scepter editor Mary Gottschalk, is designed to be user-friendly for contemporary readers, without sacrificing the wisdom of More's original. This difficult undertaking has taken hundreds of long days of research and reflection, not only because of the significant