

MOST FAMOUS OF MORE'S SPURIOUS PRAYERS :

GIVE ME A GOOD DIGESTION, LORD ...

The best-known prayer by St Francis of Assisi – “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace...” – is unknown to the editors of St Francis, though it breathes his spirit.

The best-known of Thomas More's prayers, his prayer par excellence, the only text by him that is familiar to thousands, is also unknown to the critical editors of his works. And yet it circulates under his name, not only in English, but in French and Italian and no doubt other languages ; under his name it has found its way onto countless postcards, and onto the walls of many dining rooms.

A letter of 30 Nov. 1971 will show to what extent its absence from More's works and from biographies of him intrigues people :

Dear Monsieur l'Abbé,

As though you weren't overworked already, here am I coming to worry you as well !

Fr Sutherland has written (for Bishop Butler) to ask me if I can trace the source of a quotation from More beginning like this : "Give me a good digestion, Lord, and something to digest." It was translated into French by Betty Scheur. I remember reading it, but where ? It doesn't seem to be in Chambers, Bassett, Bremond, Bridgett, Reynolds, Sargent, Walter, Routh, Stewart. I am grieved not to have been able to help hitherto, but if anyone can it will be you.

Your silly apologetic

D. O'S.

I have quoted Dorothea's note in full because it shows a true friend of More prepared, in response to a query, to search no fewer than 9 different biographies. If the International Secretary can help, it is because other perceptive bees have been active in this meadow recently.

Where did our London *amica* read the prayer ? No doubt in *Moreana* no. 4 of September 1964, pp. 43-44, where it appeared with a French version that probably differs from Betty Scheur's. We reprinted it chiefly to warn our fellowship against patronizing it as authentic.

The ascription to More is by no means surprising : the man is so rich – in iconography as well as in literature and in the field of merry tales – that he will never lack lenders : “To every man that hath there shall be given, and he shall abound” as he himself writes, quoting Matthew 25.29, in Book II of his *Confutation* (p. 206 of the Yale edition, forthcoming).

To point out that the prayer does not belong to the Morean corpus does not mean ostracizing it. In full knowledge of its spuriousness, I recited it by way of grace on 17 May 1972, at the St Thomas More Society luncheon in Washington, and I approved Charlotte Murphy’s xero-copying of the text for distribution to her fellow-lawyers. At the agapê in Marion Terrell’s apartment on 31 May, Bernard Peebles read it out so winningly that our commensal, Paul Franz Jaquet, M.D., began to pass it on to various patients of his, asking them whether it rang a bell. One of them, Miss Edna Tulsey, mobilized a couple of fellow-octogenarians, and together they produced the following sources :

1. *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, selected by Hazel Felleman, Garden City publishing Company, Garden City, N.Y., 1936.

2. *Golden Book of Prayer*, an anthology edited by Donald B. Aldrich, Perma books, 1941, gives the poem as follows :

Give me a good digestion, Lord,
And also something to digest.
Give me a healthy body, Lord,
With sense to keep it at its best.

Give me a healthy mind, Lord,
To keep the good and pure in sight,
Which, seeing sin, is not appalled,
But finds a way to set it right.

Give me a mind that is not bored,
That does not whimper, whine or sigh ;
Don’t let me worry overmuch
About the fussy thing called I.

Give me a sense of humor, Lord,
Give me the grace to see a joke,
To get some happiness from life
And pass it on to other folk.

Anonymous. From a tablet in Chester Cathedral, England.

The poem is divided into 8-line stanzas in our 1964 edition of it, and there are some textual variants. Ours reads :

- at line 5 : "Give me a healthy mind, good Lord",
- at line 9 : "Give me a healthy soul, good Lord",
- at line 15 : "To get some pleasure out of life".

Chester Cathedral : this golden clue prompted me to approach the Anglican clergy there. A friendly letter from Peter T. Porter, Cathedral Secretary, was followed by a proper answer from the Dean himself, who wrote on 17 August, enclosing a card which is reproduced here, both the poem and the note on its author :

Give me a good digestion, Lord,
And also something to digest ;
But when and how that something comes
I leave to Thee, Who knowest best.

Give me a healthy body, Lord ;
Give me the sense to keep it so ;
Also a heart that is not bored
Whatever work I have to do.

Give me a healthy mind, Good Lord,
That finds the good that dodges sight ;
And seeing sin, is not appalled,
But seeks a way to put it right.

Give me a point of view, Good Lord,
Let me know what it is, and why.
Don't let me worry overmuch
About the thing that's known as "I".

Give me a sense of humour, Lord,
Give me the power to see a joke,
To get some happiness from life
And pass it on to other folk.

T.H.B.W.

The above lines were written by Thomas Henry Basil Webb, only son of Lt.-Col. Sir Henry Webb, Bt., born on August 12th, 1898, educated at Winchester College – he was killed on the Somme, December 1st, 1917, aged 19.

The Dean, the Very Reverend G.W.O. Addleshaw, M.A., B.D., F.S.A., authored *The Pictorial History of Chester Cathedral*, in the Pitkin "Pride of Britain" series. The book tells of how a church of Anglo-Saxon canons, containing a shrine of the relics of St. Werburgh, was built on the present site of Chester Cathedral

in the 10th century. The church was transformed in 1092 into a Benedictine Abbey by St. Anselm. On the dissolution of the Abbey the church, in 1541, became the Cathedral of the newly formed diocese of Chester : and the last Abbot became the first Dean. Memorable connections are Higden of the *Polychronicon*, and George Berkeley, the Anglican philosopher and bishop. Considerable additions and alterations were made in the early Tudor period, and Henry VIII's coat of arms is still conspicuous in the cloisters near the Refectory doorway.

To quote from the Dean's letter,

The prayer is not written up anywhere in the Cathedral. We have it on sale, as a kind of memento of our mediaeval Refectory.

As you will see, the prayer has little relation to the prayers of Sir Thomas More. It is very typical of the best type of Public School Christianity in England at the beginning of this century. There was not a wide-spread interest in Sir Thomas More then, though *Utopia* was read in the History Schools at Oxford. The card is immensely popular. Dean Bennett (1920-1937) had it printed. He was the first Dean to make an English Cathedral a welcoming place for all comers.

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The gradual obliteration of Thomas H.B. Webb's memory – still a name in 1938, then only a place in 1941 – is perceptible in a third source dug up by Miss Tulsey :

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations,

14th ed. rev., Little, Brown & Co., Boston-Toronto, 1968.

In a footnote (p. 946 a) to lines by Donald Robert Perry Marquis, 1878-1937, the first two lines of our prayer are quoted and credited as "Anonymous, A Pilgrim's Grace, Stanza 1".

G. MARC'HADOUR