



Note on the Title: The full title of this work is *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation made by a Hungarian in Latin, and translated out of Latin into French, and out of French into English*. Why give such a perplexing and playful title to this work, composed in the Tower of London during More's imprisonment in 1534-35? Why set *A Dialogue* in 1527-28?

Timeline of Dates Referred to in *A Dialogue of Comfort*

1521: Suleiman the Magnificent leads the Turks in conquering Belgrade.

1522: Turks conquer Rhodes after five-month siege.

1526: Turks conquer Buda, Hungary (everyone over 13 killed; children brought to Turkey).

1527-28: The time when this dialogue is set.

1529: Turks attack Vienna, but must withdraw for winter.

Character Names in *A Dialogue of Comfort*

As in *Utopia*, his earlier dialogue, More plays with the meaning of names in *A Dialogue of Comfort*.

- Antony: recalls the long-suffering saint, whose example helped lead St. Augustine to convert (see *Confessions*, Book 8). The name is from the Greek for "flower." Cf. Mark Antony in ancient Rome as well.
- Vincent: "he who conquers" (from *vincere*: "to conquer"). How are themes of conquering and being conquered woven throughout the work, and to what purpose? Does Vincent live up to his name by the end?

Overview and Study Questions for Books 1 & 2 of *A Dialogue*

Terrified young Vincent approaches old Antony as "a natural father" (1107.37) and asks for Antony's "good help and counsel and comfort" (1107.34). After considering the difference between counsel and comfort (see on the next page the outline of 2.15-16), think about these questions:

- What is old Antony's strategy in calming terrified young Vincent in Books 1 & 2?
Does he give more counsel or more comfort, or does he mostly provide help of another kind?
N.B.: 2.11: Antony distinguishes four types of temptations based on Psalm 91 [90], verses 5-6.
N.B.: 2.15-16: Why focus so much time and attention (fourteen pages) on suicide?

Other Study Questions

1. Does Antony succeed in teaching Vincent how to train his emotions through the proper use of reason? If so, how does he do it? If not, what seems to be missing in Antony's approach?
2. Why begin by leading Vincent away from the classical philosophers in 1.1?
3. At the beginning, what ideas and images dominate Vincent's mind? What passion(s) – besides fear – color and influence his judgment?
4. How can adversity be better than prosperity? How would this view comport with More's youthful suggestions that the best life is the life of the ordinary citizen, or his poetry on fortune and poverty?
5. What role, if any, do the many "merry tales" play in Vincent's change?
6. What images are most memorable?
7. In Antony's approach, what is the relation of desire, intellect, imagination, and will? What is the role of each? Does Antony rely too much on reason to overcome the power of reason? Why emphasize reason, thinking, and meditating rather than sacraments and grace?
8. In this *Dialogue of Comfort*, does Antony spend more time counseling or comforting Vincent?

Overall Questions for Reflection on *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*

In the course of this dialogue, what change (if any) does old Antony actually facilitate in young Vincent? Even on page 1237 (Book 3, Chapter 24), Vincent compares himself to a faint-hearted deer, and he cannot imagine how he could withstand the terrors of the Turks and the threats of violence. Why ask him to act a role on page 1211? Why use the images of the world-as-a-jail and God-as-chief-jailor in Book 3, Chapter 19? Are the reward of heaven and the fear of hell emphasized too much at the end rather than the love of God? What, finally, was Vincent most attached to, in light of More's *Dialogue*? – his life, pride or reputation, wealth or ease, authority or position, or...?

Key Texts on the Temptation to Suicide in Book 2, Chapters 15-16

- **Antony's key concern and question:** How to cure the fear of one tempted to commit suicide?
- **Vincent's wondering:** Young inexperienced Vincent wonders, can the temptation to suicide ever be cast off? (*EWTM*, 1164)
- **Antony's arguing:** Old Antony strongly argues that it can be, but warns that grace and good counsel are needed to get rid of this "most horrible" of all fears.
- **Antony on counsel:** He explains what counsel is and who can profit from it (1164-1175).

Key Distinction in *A Dialogue of Comfort: Counsel versus Comfort*

- **Overview:** In Book 2, Antony distinguishes between counsel and comfort (1165.19) and then gives three major examples to show the difference between these.
- **Opening issue: some people cannot be counseled,** e.g. those who suffer from and are ruled by a frantic fantasy that arises from malice and hardened pride.
- **Antony's examples:** first, Antony discusses the fiendish shrew of Buda, a woman who deliberately angers her carpenter husband so much that he cuts off her head (1165); second, he discusses the proud rich widow of Vienna who arranges for her own death and wants to be canonized (1166). Others are only deluded and fearful, rather than hardened and frantic, and therefore they are open to counsel and can profit from it.
- **Key difference between counsel & comfort:** Antony next discusses Cassian's "holy monk" who thinks he should kill himself and Cato who does kill himself.
- **Antony follows Augustine:** counsel is needed for a mind distracted by some devilish fantasy "to be called home"; comfort is needed for "lifting up" the courage of one "oppressed by faint heart and fear" (1167-68).
- **Antony on counsel (1168-1174):** Antony compares the process to waking a person from sleep; this must be done pleasantly, not abruptly. To counsel, you must know the person well; you must first help the other person to speak freely, and then you must help the person see the fantasy that preoccupies his or her mind. The major example Antony gives is Cassian's proud monk who wants to kill himself. As this example shows, helping a person to see that his or her inclination to suicide is a temptation, a delusion, can be very difficult. The person may even believe God wills it, Antony notes. Antony recommends patience and ingenuity in finding and devising a strategy to help the person discern truth from false illusion. As an example of such ingenuity, he tells the merry and bizarre tale of the carver craving crucifixion on Good Friday, until his clever wife scourges him first. If all else fails, you may have to bind the person fast in bed.
- **Counsel and prayer:** Throughout this process, Antony insists that the person's friends must supplement counsel by praying for the one tempted, since the person himself is incapable of doing so in this state.
- **Antony on comfort (1174-1179):** Once out of danger (and once suicide is seen as a temptation), the person now needs comfort, i.e., encouragement in bearing up. The comfort now counseled takes the form of a process: first, lifting up his spirit; giving loving encouragement throughout; understanding the devil's ploys; instructing in the need for vigorous fight; giving counsel & prayer; providing doctors both for bodily and spiritual ills; making confession available; teaching how & where to fight and helpful prayers, "keeping in mind the Passion of Christ" and verses from the psalms.

Discussion of the Three Other Types of Temptation in Books 2 and 3 of *A Dialogue of Comfort*

- **Second type of temptation:** in contrast to the first type of "nighttime fear," the second is pride "in the daytime of prosperity" exemplified by "the arrow that flies by day" (1179-1182)
- **Third type of temptation:** the third is the "busyness" that "walks about in the darkness" (1182ff)
- **Fourth and worst type:** the attack of the "noonday devil"—i.e., open persecution (see Book 3)

Book Three Questions for Reflection: How does Antony lead this conversation to its ending? After all the labors of *A Dialogue*, what are Antony's final subjects? What are his final appeals to Vincent? Is he successful?