



RED MASS
for the Legal Community in Schuylkill County, PA
St. Patrick's Church (Pottsville)
November 20, 2009

Honorable Judges, Esteemed Attorneys, Elected Officials, and all of you who have gathered here for this celebration of the Red Mass sponsored by the St. Thomas More Society in Schuylkill County ...

Today, the proverbial tables have been turned.

The gospel reading we just heard¹ narrates again the infamous story of Jesus' overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Those who at the time had legitimate business interests were driven out of that sacred space because their corrupt and exploitative practices had become evidence of social injustice in the very place where eternal justice was being sought by those most in need, those whose only recourse was to their God in prayer. You can imagine what that scene must have looked like, and the turmoil that ensued. Yet, every day Jesus came back to that same place to teach, and the crowds hung on his every word.



This month, the tables were turned again. But this time, Jesus is the one being expelled from places of teaching. In a unanimous ruling, the European Court of Human Rights decided against the presence of crucifixes in schools in Italy. Notwithstanding that country's cultural heritage, the Court held that such a display of the cross contravenes government neutrality, conscripts parental rights, and contradicts educational pluralism. The scene is less vividly graphic than the biblical story about the Jerusalem Temple, to be sure, but the judgment about what does or does not belong in a democratic society is no less clear.



Today, you who are agents of the Law – who defend and uphold those human rights that lie at the very foundation of a democratic society – you gather in this religious place in which a crucifix looms large. You do so, I think, not because you wish to flaunt the propositions of religion or ignore the principles of democracy, but precisely because you esteem and value

both, in the recognition that religious faith and civil law both seek a similar objective, namely justice for the good of all. That shared purpose and value is embodied in the life of ST. THOMAS MORE (1478-1535) whose public witness to the law – both human and divine – in the sixteenth century speaks admirably to you who live and work in this county’s legal community in the twenty-first century.



Thomas More is celebrated as the first layman to serve as Lord Chancellor to the King of England, and is venerated as a martyr for his steadfast refusal to support King Henry VIII’s tyrannical intention to subsume all authority, even that of the Church, under his imperial control. As Chancellor, he used his legal acumen to dispense justice with noble discretion, as he sought “to rejuvenate the ancient theory that judges had a personal duty in conscience to see right done by all whose business was entertained in the courts they directed.”² In his martyrdom, he demonstrated “a fundamental truth of political ethics” by defending “in the name of the primacy of conscience ... the individual’s freedom vis-à-vis political power.”³ These and other episodes from the saint’s life point to what Pope John Paul II described as a “harmony between the natural and supernatural [that] is perhaps the element which more than any other defines the personality of this great English statesman: he lived his intense public life with a simple humility marked by good humour, even at the moment of his execution.”⁴

But dramatic as these historical episodes are, the strength of Thomas More’s character that speaks to us this day comes from something much less public, though no less instructive. The example by which he raised his children, and the understanding of education which guided him in that parental duty, remind us all of a right-ordered humanism that best serves the ideals of democratic life. The saint states clearly his fundamental principle in this regard: “Put virtue in the first place ..., learning in the second.”⁵ For Thomas More, “(t)rue virtue is essentially a freely chosen and fervently cultivated love for the highest and most enduring goods, not for the passing pleasures that are often mistaken for them.”⁶ Learning virtue holds pride of place for him because “he saw the primary task of education as cultivating a good conscience and noble loves. And in that order ... because one must constantly use good judgment to discern what is indeed noble and good.”⁷ To accomplish this proper discernment, the saintly jurist inculcated in his children what he called “right imagination and remembrance,”⁸ so that they might develop stable convictions that would give them “solid joy”⁹ amid whatever conditions they found themselves.



The conditions in which we find ourselves also call for “right imagination and remembrance,” and what we remember, with an imagination aided by the fixture of a cross, is that mercy is the virtue which complements justice in the face of human suffering. Whether adored by Christians, or simply acknowledged by people of right reason



and good will, the cross calls to mind an actual historical event, one that may also contribute to the rich heritage of national cultures and, thus, to human civilization. Freely taken up by one for the sake of others, Jesus’ passionate embrace of suffering has the power to provide comfort and strength to anyone in need. In a world in which “(s)uffering is too common to be interesting, too terrible to be taken for granted and too mysterious to be understood by the human mind left to itself,”¹⁰ the cross stands as an enduring reminder that Someone cares for us, and cares so deeply as to give His life for all. Looking upon it, we are invited, not compelled, to imagine “that love is present in the world and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity or the world are involved.”¹¹

People of every time and place stand in need of that virtue called Love and can welcome that teaching shown by the Cross, with or without adhering to its doctrinal development in a particular religion. Thomas More certainly did. He taught it to his children, was motivated by it in court, and died for it when his faith was challenged. Today, each of us is invited anew to consider what that cross stands for, to ponder what it could mean for our own lives, and to wonder about how we might bring mercy to bear upon our work in the realm of social justice.



In 1929 G.K. Chesterton claimed that “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 about a hundred years’ time.”¹² As we draw nearer to the fulfillment of that hundred-year prophecy, we see the ever growing importance of St. Thomas More’s exemplary life in a world that could benefit from greater education in virtue, broader justice for all, and firmer conviction in the pursuit of truth.

And so, in this Red Mass – whose color links the blood of martyrdom with the robes of justice – we gather in this place of prayer to call upon the power of God, that the Holy Spirit might guide all of you in your work, so that you, too, may be steadfast proponents of all that is right and good and true. Like the saint whose patronage we remember this day, may you imagine and envision your legal work to be a chance to unite your natural talents with a supernatural vision, a time to serve not the enticements of power but the supreme ideal of justice, and an opportunity to put public activity at the service of the human person for a virtuous democracy.¹³

The tables are now yours to turn right side up.

¹ Luke 19:45-48, for Friday of the Thirty-third week in Ordinary Time.

² JOHN GUY, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 79, cited in GERARD B. WEGEMER, *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Press, 1995), p. 135.

³ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter issued *motu proprio* (31 October 2000), "Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians" (no. 4, par. 7).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter issued *motu proprio* (no. 4, par. 4). PETER SCHINELLER, "The Smiling Christ," *America* (March 30, 2009): "In the midst of their passion and pain, even in the face of death, [some saints] keep faith and manifest a sense of joy. St. Thomas More joked with his executioner: 'Be not afraid. You send me to God'."

⁵ THOMAS MORE, *Selected Letters*. Trans. Elizabeth F. Rogers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 27, cited in WEGEMER, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 90.

⁶ WEGEMER, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 80.

⁷ WEGEMER, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 87.

⁸ THOMAS MORE, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963-1997), 12: 317, lines 12-13, cited in WEGEMER, *Portrait of Courage*, pp. 87-88.

⁹ THOMAS MORE, *Selected Letters*, p. 105, cited in WEGEMER, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Editors, "The Cross and the Empty Tomb," *America* (April 12, 2004).

¹¹ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, encyclical letter on "God, the Father of Mercy," 30 November 1980 (no. 7, par. 6).

¹² G.K. CHESTERTON, *The Fame of Blessed Thomas More* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929), p. 63.

¹³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter issued *motu proprio* (no. 4, par. 2).

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