



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER

ISSUED MOTU PROPRIO

***PROCLAIMING SAINT THOMAS MORE
PATRON OF STATESMEN AND POLITICIANS***

POPE JOHN PAUL II

FOR PERPETUAL REMEMBRANCE

1. The life and martyrdom of Saint Thomas More have been the source of a message which spans the centuries and which speaks to people everywhere of the inalienable dignity of the human conscience, which, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, is "the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God, whose voice echoes within them" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16). Whenever men or women heed the call of truth, their conscience then guides their actions reliably towards good. Precisely because of the witness which he bore, even at the price of his life, to the primacy of truth over power, Saint Thomas More is venerated as an imperishable example of moral integrity. And even outside the Church, particularly among those with responsibility for the destinies of peoples, he is acknowledged as a source of inspiration for a political system which has as its supreme goal the service of the human person.

Recently, several Heads of State and of Government, numerous political figures, and some Episcopal Conferences and individual Bishops have asked me to proclaim Saint Thomas More the Patron of Statesmen and Politicians. Those supporting this petition include people from different political, cultural and religious allegiances, and this is a sign of the deep and widespread interest in the thought and activity of this outstanding Statesman.

2. Thomas More had a remarkable political career in his native land. Born in London in 1478 of a respectable family, as a young boy he was placed in the service of the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Morton, Lord Chancellor of the Realm. He then studied law at Oxford and London, while broadening his interests in the spheres of culture, theology and classical literature. He mastered Greek and enjoyed the company and friendship of important figures of Renaissance culture, including Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

His sincere religious sentiment led him to pursue virtue through the assiduous practice of asceticism: he cultivated friendly relations with the Observant Franciscans of the Friary at Greenwich, and for a time he lived at the London

Charterhouse, these being two of the main centres of religious fervour in the Kingdom. Feeling himself called to marriage, family life and dedication as a layman, in 1505 he married Jane Colt, who bore him four children. Jane died in 1511 and Thomas then married Alice Middleton, a widow with one daughter. Throughout his life he was an affectionate and faithful husband and father, deeply involved in his children's religious, moral and intellectual education. His house offered a welcome to his children's spouses and his grandchildren, and was always open to his many young friends in search of the truth or of their own calling in life. Family life also gave him ample opportunity for prayer in common and lectio divina, as well as for happy and wholesome relaxation. Thomas attended daily Mass in the parish church, but the austere penances which he practised were known only to his immediate family.

3. He was elected to Parliament for the first time in 1504 under King Henry VII. The latter's successor Henry VIII renewed his mandate in 1510, and even made him the Crown's representative in the capital. This launched him on a prominent career in public administration. During the following decade the King sent him on several diplomatic and commercial missions to Flanders and the territory of present-day France. Having been made a member of the King's Council, presiding judge of an important tribunal, deputy treasurer and a knight, in 1523 he became Speaker of the House of Commons.

Highly esteemed by everyone for his unflinching moral integrity, sharpness of mind, his open and humorous character, and his extraordinary learning, in 1529 at a time of political and economic crisis in the country he was appointed by the King to the post of Lord Chancellor. The first layman to occupy this position, Thomas faced an extremely difficult period, as he sought to serve King and country. In fidelity to his principles, he concentrated on promoting justice and restraining the harmful influence of those who advanced their own interests at the expense of the weak. In 1532, not wishing to support Henry VIII's intention to take control of the Church in England, he resigned. He withdrew from public life, resigning himself to suffering poverty with his family and being deserted by many people who, in the moment of trial, proved to be false friends.

Given his inflexible firmness in rejecting any compromise with his own conscience, in 1534 the King had him imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he was subjected to various kinds of psychological pressure. Thomas More did not allow himself to waver, and he refused to take the oath requested of him, since this would have involved accepting a political and ecclesiastical arrangement that prepared the way for uncontrolled despotism. At his trial, he made an impassioned defence of his own convictions on the indissolubility of marriage, the respect due to the juridical patrimony of Christian civilization, and the freedom of the Church in her relations with the State. Condemned by the Court, he was beheaded.

With the passing of the centuries discrimination against the Church diminished. In 1850 the English Catholic Hierarchy was re-established. This made it possible to initiate the causes of many martyrs. Thomas More, together with 53 other martyrs, including Bishop John Fisher, was beatified by Pope Leo XIII in 1886. And with John Fisher, he was canonized by Pius XI in 1935, on the fourth centenary of his martyrdom.

4. There are many reasons for proclaiming Thomas More Patron of statesmen and people in public life. Among these is the need felt by the world of politics and public administration for credible role models able to indicate the path of truth at a time in history when difficult challenges and crucial responsibilities are increasing. Today in fact strongly innovative economic forces are reshaping social structures; on the other hand, scientific achievements in the area of biotechnology

underline the need to defend human life at all its different stages, while the promises of a new society — successfully presented to a bewildered public opinion — urgently demand clear political decisions in favour of the family, young people, the elderly and the marginalized.

In this context, it is helpful to turn to the example of Saint Thomas More, who distinguished himself by his constant fidelity to legitimate authority and institutions precisely in his intention to serve not power but the supreme ideal of justice. His life teaches us that government is above all an exercise of virtue. Unwavering in this rigorous moral stance, this English statesman placed his own public activity at the service of the person, especially if that person was weak or poor; he dealt with social controversies with a superb sense of fairness; he was vigorously committed to favouring and defending the family; he supported the all-round education of the young. His profound detachment from honours and wealth, his serene and joyful humility, his balanced knowledge of human nature and of the vanity of success, his certainty of judgement rooted in faith: these all gave him that confident inner strength that sustained him in adversity and in the face of death. His sanctity shone forth in his martyrdom, but it had been prepared by an entire life of work devoted to God and neighbour.

Referring to similar examples of perfect harmony between faith and action, in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* I wrote: "The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfil his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ" (No. 17).

This harmony between the natural and the supernatural 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.

This was the height to which he was led by his passion for the truth. What enlightened his conscience was the sense that man cannot be sundered from God, nor politics from morality. As I have already had occasion to say, "man is created by God, and therefore human rights have their origin in God, are based upon the design of creation and form part of the plan of redemption. One might even dare to say that the rights of man are also the rights of God" (*Speech*, 7 April 1998).

And it was precisely in defence of the rights of conscience that the example of Thomas More shone brightly. It can be said that he demonstrated in a singular way the value of a moral conscience which is "the witness of God himself, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man's soul" (Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, 58), even if, in his actions against heretics, he reflected the limits of the culture of his time.

In the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council notes how in the world today there is "a growing awareness of the matchless dignity of the human person, who is superior to all else and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable" (No. 26). The life of Saint Thomas More clearly illustrates a fundamental truth of political ethics. The defence of the Church's freedom from unwarranted interference by the State is at the same time a defence, in the name of the primacy of conscience, of the individual's freedom vis-à-vis political power. Here we find the basic principle of every civil order consonant with human nature.

5. I am confident therefore that the proclamation of the outstanding figure of Saint Thomas More as Patron of Statesmen and Politicians will redound to the good of society. It is likewise a gesture fully in keeping with the spirit of the Great Jubilee which carries us into the Third Christian Millennium.

Therefore, after due consideration and willingly acceding to the petitions addressed to me, I establish and declare Saint Thomas More the heavenly Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, and I decree that he be ascribed all the liturgical honours and privileges which, according to law, belong to the Patrons of categories of people.

Blessed and glorified be Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of man, yesterday, today and for ever.

Given at Saint Peter's, on the thirty-first day of October in the year 2000, the twenty-third of my Pontificate.

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