



More News

The Newsletter of The Thomas More Society of America

November 1997

As announced in the August newsletter, **Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas** will speak at the **Annual Dinner** on November 14 at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda.

Justice Thomas was born in the small town of Pin Point, Georgia, in 1948. He graduated from Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1971, earning honors in English. In 1974 he graduated from Yale Law School. After serving as Assistant Attorney General to Missouri's John C. Danforth, he worked for a private company until 1979, when he returned as a legislative assistant to Danforth, then a member of the U. S. Senate. From 1982-1990, Justice Thomas officiated as chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and in 1990, President Bush appointed him to the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Less than two years later, Justice Thomas was selected to serve on the Supreme Court. Since his confirmation, Justice Thomas has been active in opposing abortion and advocating law enforcement. Along with Justices Antonin Scalia, William H. Rehnquist and Byron R. White, Justice Thomas also has defended prayer in school, emphasizing its unifying role.

Source: Joan Biskupic and Elder Witt's *Guide to the U.S. Supreme Court*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997).

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Announcements

☞ The 23rd conference of the Society for Utopian Studies will be held in Montreal, October 15-18, 1998. The S.U.S. is seeking abstracts of proposed papers or panels addressing the literary, social and communal expressions of utopianism. Send 1-2 page

abstracts by May, 1998, to Naomi Jacobs,
English Department, University of Maine,
Orono, ME 04469-0122.

Phone: 207/581-3809

Fax: 207/581-1604

☞ The International Thomas More

Conference, "Thomas More in his Time: Renaissance Humanism and Renaissance Law," will be held at Maynooth College, Ireland, August 9-16, 1998. Topics for papers and panels include: the foundation provided by Aquinas' distinctions between the secular world and the supernatural; humanism and the medieval heritage in the visual arts; the influence of St. Augustine on More concerning law and political philosophy; and the possible influence of More on liberal Irish statesmen Edmund Burke and Daniel O'Connell. For more information, see *Moreana* 33 (1997): 3-36.

☞ As secretary of The Thomas More Society, I would like to thank John T. Miller, Joseph D. Crumlish, James P. Keenan and Joseph F. Spaniol, Jr. for their suggestions, their graciousness and their diligence in editing *More News* over the past year.

Jennifer Bess

The Thomas More Society of America would like to thank John T. Miller for his service as President of the Society during the past year.

He Knew Who He Was
Memorial Mass in honor of
St. Thomas More, homily by
Reverend Thomas P. Sandi
St. Joseph's Church
June 20, 1997

What benefit is it to anyone to win the whole world and forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:25, NJB)

Today's Scripture calls us to value that which is most unique and precious to a human being -- to defend it to the death -- and to depend on God intentionally and completely. Saint Thomas More *knew who he was*, and so he gave his life for what he could not deny, his very self. It is his unswerving commitment to the primacy of the law of conscience, and therefore his deepest self, to which I shall speak.

Thomas was probably someone anyone here would like to have known and with whom we would want to have had a conversation. If you asked Thomas More a question, he would no doubt give you the answer, whether it was the answer you wanted to hear or not. Simultaneously, he could inform, correct, and delight any person, age, rank, and gender notwithstanding. He knew the value of humor and fellowship to make the hard realities easier to face. He worked hard to guard and celebrate the highest common denominator in human affairs -- conscience!

Of course, as you know, he was many *persons*: an Englishman of the late Middle Ages, a genuine scholar in possession of a first-rate intellect, a faithful husband (twice),

a dotting father, grandfather and father-in-law, a true wit, a faithful friend, an engaging storyteller, a respected lawyer, a celebrated author in at least three languages, a knight, a public servant of the highest caliber, Lord Chancellor of England, a churchman of unequalled respect (and remember, he was *NOT* a clergyman); a man of conscience, a prisoner, a martyr, and a saint.

He was also a man known to embody uncommon values such as goodness, simplicity, selflessness, gregariousness, gentleness, humor, humility, civility, nobility, friendship, integrity, innocence, generosity, wisdom beyond schooling, singular virtue, devotion, awesome serenity, and unaffected holiness; and also, those virtues that became an entree to disaster: consistency, constancy, seriousness, justice, moral strength, fidelity to "duty, honor, country," and especially loyalty to his liege lord, the *King* (yes, *but God first*).

Now, as a priest and military chaplain, I know well what it is to live my faith on a public stage, and how difficult it is to wisely and loyally serve the state as a *visible reminder of the Holy*. So with your permission, I offer you the meager experience of this ordinary Thomas in the face of that extraordinary Thomas *whose fellow we shall never meet*.

As in everyone's life, if we listen carefully, there was a kind of muted drumbeat of conscience development in *this* Thomas' spiritual journey; it calls me to task, still. As a boy, my personal faith heroes were the three martyred Thomases: the Apostle, after whom I was named; Archbishop Becket, after whom Thomas More was named; and Sir Thomas More himself, canonized just thirteen years before my birth, who captured my imagination. Each spoke *the truth to power*, with a muscular faith. Each was required to rely, finally, on God and God alone. But More seemed the steadiest to me; he *always* seemed to know himself, his conscience and what he was supposed to do. From an early age, I felt my spiritual life being inspired and nourished through an appeal to the *mind* -- the reasoning process -- and to the inviolability of *Self*. As a youngster, I remember serving mass with special attention on his early summer feast day; I chanced by the famous Holbein painting in New York City's Frick Collection as a teenager; I was treated to the Robert Bolt play, *A Man for All Seasons*, within the first year of its premiere; I saw the Oscar-winning Zimmermann film in New York on opening day; I recited Roper's version of More's final words to the court in a seminary poetry reading; as a young priest, I toured the Tower of London, the Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul, and especially the locked room where a bust and a coffin stand in tribute to the martyr. The mid-eighties television film of the Bolt play, starring Charlton Heston, was an unexpected boon to me in my middle age. (Of course, who would dare try to outdo the great actor, Paul Scofield in the part of Thomas? Actually, Heston sketches quite a fine interpretation.) Thomas' principled life became a lifetime anchor and model for me. I attribute my positive response to God's call in the priesthood, and later, to that of my country, in the chaplaincy, to Thomas' bravery in placing God -- known through reason and conscience -- over all.

Five hundred years after his martyr's death in the Tower, people feel both comfortable and uncomfortable with Thomas More. He is like us and quite *unlike* us because he recognized early on he had *only himself* -- loyally tied to his church and God -- in the end, and he *died*

for, rather than forfeit, that! The mark of a hero -- touching the very marrow of nobility of the human person! His life is saintly precisely because it validates a healthy spiritual tension between who the person of faith *is* and might yet *become*. Are not we all, corporately and singly, called to be true to who we are, to live and die for what we believe, and so become what might be -- citizens of heaven -- and thus *reluctant heroes* in a passing world?

Certainly, More's heroism included some very human traits. He was smart and he knew it (he didn't *suffer fools gladly*); he was ambitious; he expected life to be hard and so didn't excuse anyone from obligations lightly; he could not live a celibate life faithfully so he turned aside from a religious vocation; he was an avid hammer of heretics; and, since he evidently couldn't tolerate pain very well, he must have dreaded encountering the common martyrdom path of drawing and quartering. But he knew and accepted his frailties, and he depended on God's grace to rise above them to face what he could not avoid. As he saw it, he had no choice. He would have *lost himself in the process* of going along with *reasonable* men and women, who were, you might say, *gaining the whole world*.

Even from before he was executed for his conscientious and lonely stance on behalf of *the authority of St. Peter and his successors*, Thomas was admired far and wide. The world took note. Death could not silence him. In fact, his death magnified his person and his position; it assured his place in the ongoing battle conscience erects for every person in every age.

No matter the cost, everyone is summoned to face himself and a similar, decisive moment - sooner or later. And so much more the man or woman of faith! Shall I hear and obey what I am at my most secret core and sanctuary, *where God and I are alone*, and pay the consequences of acting on it, or not?

Given our God-given human frailty, will each one of us finally be able to, in Thomas More's words, *fall back on our prayers* and *serve God wittily in the tangle of our minds*? Equipped with the *divine* spark, each one of us has the ability to proclaim *I know who I am!* But will we have the *will* and the needed courage, dear friends, to say and mean those forbidding Gospel words about *losing the whole world, and not forfeiting my own self*?

Is there an alternative? I think not. We must do the best we can with what we have been given. So bravely bear the sweet burden of conscience; it's *YOU* we are talking about. The world will take note; so will God. *Not a bad public, that!* And *we shall meet in heaven together, where we shall be merry forever and ever*.





Greg Walker.

Persuasive Fictions: Faction, Faith and Political Culture in the Reign of Henry VIII.
Aldershot, England: Scolar P, 1996, xiv + 213 pp., ISBN 1-85928-139-7, \$74.95.

In his introduction, Walker announces that his purpose is to “examine with a skeptical eye the idea of faction, both as an explanation of particular events, and as a general principle for understanding the reign” of Henry VIII (1). But his study does much more than this: it explores schisms, sects and scandals, as well as politics, public image and humanist self-evaluation.

In the first half of the study, Walker takes a revisionist approach to the traditional contention that the Henrician court was a place of organized, factional dissension and of various groups vying for privilege. He argues instead that groups of like-minded individuals may have been too disorganized and uninformed to be effective lobbyists and that Henry’s hard-handed rule left little room for factious politicians or unruly minions. Similarly, Walker argues that the current critical view that images of Henry through the 1530s and 1540s inaugurated “the first concentrated effort by an English king to create a popular image of himself,” are as exaggerated as those promoting the significance of organized factions (72). Hans Holbein’s portrait, for example, with its realism and stateliness, has been interpreted as an assertion of royal supremacy, as a piece of political propaganda. Walker, however, sees it not a revolution in the iconography of royal portraiture, but a product of a great artist painting Henry as he really was: large, regal and imposing.

In the second part of *Persuasive Fictions*, Walker’s treatment of religious sects echoes that of his treatment of political factions. He argues that what have been called sects were actually discrete dissenters, that the Lollards, for example, were not an organized group of reformers in the first decades of the sixteenth century. In fact, he explains, even the definition of heresy itself was ill-defined, while many

reformers with officially heretical ideals, such as promoting the publication of a vernacular Bible, certainly would not have considered themselves guilty of the crime. The crown, moreover, was more interested in fostering unity than in convicting heretics, as the cast of Thomas Bilney reveals. Even Bilney, whose trial, in part, occasioned Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, occupied the no-man’s-land between orthodoxy and heresy, escaping persecution in his early career partly because of the ill-defined nature of the latter.

Offering further confrontation of the current critical tendency to over-emphasize the effect of dissent and the role of propaganda, Walker examines humanist ideals which fostered self-examination and the exposure of personal weaknesses, including those of courtiers and kings. As part of such ideals, Thomas Elyot’s *The Governour*, as well as tapestries and other wall-hangings depicting classical, religious and allegorical scenes of virtue and morality, were meant to fashion a moral leadership, and specifically a king whose willingness to confront his faults and embrace self-improvement would serve as an example to his followers.

In conclusion, Walker’s study reveals how hindsight may privilege certain movements and events, texts and artwork. In fact, his work implies that what we may interpret as dissension may have been only part of a larger trend nurturing reconciliation, a trend whose affinity for complex analysis and plurality tantalizes the modern mind into seeking hidden agendas, organized conspiracies and conscious manipulation which may or may not have prevailed in the early modern era.

reviewed by Jennifer Bess

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