Thomas More: A Man for This Season

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On the number of times that I have attended the Red Mass, it never, ever dawned on me that I would one day be receiving the St. Thomas More Medal. Quite frankly, I find it a bit overwhelming. I want to thank Dean Riccio, Seton Hall University Law School, Bill McGuire, Sister Patricia Cody, and the other members of the selection committee. I also want to thank everyone here for sharing this experience with me and my family.

When I began thinking about what I would say to this very educated, intelligent, and speech-wary (if not speech weary) audience, I thought I had the perfect topic: Thomas More had a reputation for humorous and witty comments. One of his most famous quips was the one made just before his execution for his conviction on perjured testimony for high treason. When he was being led from the Tower of London, where he had been imprisoned for fifteen months, he turned to the Lieutenant of the Tower and said: "I pray see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself."

I even found a book published in the late 1800s called *The Wit and Wisdom of Thomas More.* As I got into it, however, I realized that More was indeed a witty person, but that his wit was not just strewn around like gold nuggets waiting to be picked up and polished. Instead, it was imbedded in his voluminous writings like a vein of gold running thinly through rock that could be extracted only with great difficulty. And I do mean voluminous. The Thomas More Project at Yale University has, I believe, published fifteen volumes of his writings. When I realized that I had to abandon More's humor as the subject for this talk, I was too far along to abandon More.

What then, I asked myself, could More have to say to us today? I then thought of our use of the expression "a Renaissance man."

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Well, if anyone was a renaissance man it certainly was More. What didn't More do and do well? He was a very successful lawyer. He quickly caught the eye of Henry VIII, who sent him abroad to negotiate critical trade agreements. More was very proud of his participation in the Treaty of Cambrai with Spain and France that brought peace to Europe for fourteen years. And somehow he found the time to write the literary masterpiece of the English Renaissance, *Utopia*, a word that he coined and a literary genre that he invented.

Nor was he a stranger to politics. More represented London in the House of Commons, became Speaker of the House, and, as we know, eventually became the Lord Chancellor of England, the highest legal officer in the realm.

And a saint to boot, but a flesh-and-blood one. A saint who you felt you had something in common with, like a wife and four children, a very busy law career (he often complained of it in his letters), and a very earthy sense of humor.

While I was trying to figure out what I could make out of this man's incredibly fertile and complex life, I happened one night by accident to come across a show on PBS Channel 13 featuring this rather odd-looking nun talking about art with great passion and authority. I learned later that her name is Sister Wendy Beckett and that she has quite a following on British TV as an art critic. Sister Wendy Beckett suggested that when you go to a museum you should focus on one or two paintings or works of art, pick out one painting, spend time with it, get up and leave the room, and then come back to it. Let the artist speak to you through the work of art.

By now you must be wondering—what does this have to do with Thomas More? Well, you will recall that one of the great portrait painters of the Renaissance was Hans Holbein the Younger, and among the many public figures he painted was Thomas More. It so happens that one of the most famous of these paintings hangs in the Frick Museum on Fifth Avenue in New York City. So, I decided to pay a visit one Sunday to Holbein's painting, keeping in mind the advice of Sister Wendy Beckett and this upcoming talk.

The painting was worth the trip. For the painting tells us what Thomas More has to say to us today. The first thing you notice is the vibrant color and rich texture of More's clothing. Around More's neck is this great gold chain, given to him upon his knighthood and worn as a symbol of his dedication to public service.

But you are quickly drawn to More's face and eyes. Remember that Holbein was noted for painting what he saw and not what his clients wanted to be seen. In More's case, the eyes are indeed the

windows to his soul. For you quickly come to realize that here is a man committed to a sense of who he was. You feel More's presence. And that is why Robert Bolt, a non-Catholic and in his own words not a Christian in any meaningful sense of the word, chose More as the hero of his play, *A Man for All Seasons*. Bolt tells us that he selected Thomas More as "a hero of selfhood."

Holbein's painting corroborates what Joseph G. Allegretti observed in his book *The Lawyer's Calling*: "The lesson of Thomas More's life is not that he refused to sign the king's oath, but that he was willing to draw a line somewhere. He was not willing to surrender his whole self to anyone or anything."

And that is why More is a man for this season. He stands in stark contrast to those in our profession who today champion unrestricted advocacy and unquestioned loyalty to the client's interests regardless of the fact that such interests may be morally repugnant. Unfortunately, and with serious consequences to our profession, the ideal of the lawyer as a hired gun is replacing the ideal of the lawyer as independent counselor. Unless we recapture, reappropriate the ideal of the lawyer whose vocabulary includes the word *ought* as well as the word *can*, we will have to abandon any pretense of being a profession.

To borrow from Bolt, too many in today's society view themselves as acting in the third person. We compartmentalize our lives so that our moral values are kept separate from our business and legal lives—we experience ourselves in the third person rather than as acting in the first person. But More recognized a continuity in his life; he had a moral center, a self that informed his personal and professional life. He acted in the first person and therefore as a moral agent. It was not an accident that he was canonized on the eve of the Second World War. The history of Germany and the Holocaust teaches us that when we abandon the concept of ourselves as moral agents, when we compartmentalize our public and private lives, the result is moral chaos with disastrous consequences. We are now hearing acknowledgments, and rightly so, of the churches' poor performance during the Holocaust. But what about the legal professionals, the custodians of the Rule of Law, during the 30s in Germany? Where were the law professors in the universities? Where were the lawyers? Where were the judges?

In conclusion, let me share with you a scene from Bolt's play where More is being chastised by his wife for having upset the king on his visit to More's home in Chelsea. The dialogue goes like this:

More: Well, Alice, what would you want me to do?

> Alice: Be ruled! If you won't rule him, be ruled!
>
> More: I neither could nor would rule my King. But there's a little, little area, it's very little—less to him than a tennis court, where I must rule myself.

To a profession that in many ways seems to have lost its bearings, Holbein's painting of More reminds us that, if we cannot be the masters of our fate, we can at least be the captains of our souls. So today More invites us to look, in solitude and in silence, for that area within where we and we alone should rule and where we can find and hold fast our self, our soul, and our God.