A politician for all seasons

by Miroslav Volf in the December 13, 2000 issue

When it became clear that we did not yet have a president-elect, I determined not to waste time glued to the television set trying to follow the meandering route that will eventually give us our new president. Better to use the time, I thought, to reflect on the nature of democracy and the character of holders of public office. On this latter issue, a single act by Pope John Paul II has charted the course of my thinking over the past few weeks. On October 31 the pope proclaimed Sir Thomas More the patron saint of politicians. As Cardinal Roger Etchegaray explained, the pope wanted to remind politicians "of the absolute priority of God in the heart of public affairs."

The choice was—perhaps surprisingly—uncontroversial. Among church folk, Anglicans presumably had the strongest grounds for objection to the pope's decision; after all, More was profoundly opposed to their very *raison d'être*. Yet they honor him "as somebody who took a stand for what he believed in," explained the chaplain of the Anglican All Saints Church in Rome. Even politicians did not protest the choice of their new patron saint. Were they all persuaded to follow More's example and obey the voice of conscience, no matter what?

A good politician, we are told, will know how to turn any situation to his or her own advantage. No wonder, then, that some of them found in More a resource for proceeding with business as usual. As Alessandra Stanley reported in the *New York Times*, some Italian politicians were quick to see in More "a model for Latin lovers." Did he not contemplate a *ménage à trois* in *Utopia*? mused former Italian president Francesco Cossiga. David Alton, a member of the English House of Lords, insisted that More would have been on his (Alton's) more liberal side on such issues as human cloning and abortion. And though he "couldn't offhand think of any colleagues willing to die for their beliefs," he rather ungallantly offered up Anne Widdicombe, a Catholic member of Parliament and a right-to-life crusader, as a potential candidate.

Governor Bush could have enlisted More after the incident of the expletive hurled at a reporter. Had not the saint-to-be used scatological language against Luther, that

“shit-devil (*cocodemon*)” who was “filled with shit (*merda*), dung (*strecus*) and excrement (*coenum*)”? Luther himself, of course, was hardly at a loss for similar terminology.

John Paul II had something else in mind, I am sure, when he elevated Sir Thomas More as a permanent example to public officials. More was a politician in the best sense of the word—an extraordinary man who used his immense talents for the public good. And he did what, in the culture of contemporary postindustrial societies, seems almost unimaginable: he chose to die rather than to compromise his conscience. He was a martyr.

Today we don’t know what to do with martyrs. For one thing, our beliefs increasingly take the form of “changing opinions” and “shifting perspectives” rather than “firm convictions” and “enduring truth claims.” Moreover, we no longer place much stock in an “afterlife” in which the rightness of our earthly actions will be validated before the ultimate judge, and so we don’t see what good could come from dying for one’s beliefs. More thought otherwise, and it is the power of these convictions, not just his great intellectual gifts and social skills, that made him both a great man and a great politician.

And yet when I when read Peter Ackroyd’s *Life of Thomas More*, it was not More’s willingness to die for his beliefs that impressed me the most. It was rather what I would describe as his “generosity”—the kind of generosity this great man learned by meditating on the passion of Christ. Consider his last words to the court that had just sentenced him to death. The charge was that he was “attempting to deprive the king of his lawful title as supreme head of the Church of England, which is treason.” As More saw it, he was not guilty since he had done nothing and said nothing regarding the issue; he had simply kept silent. After he was judged guilty, and was asked whether he had “anythinge els to alleage for your defense,” he uttered these astonishing words:

> More haue I not to say, my Lordes, but that like as the blessed Apostle St. Pawle, as we read in thactes of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St Stephen, and kepte their clothes that stoned him to deathe, and yeat be they nowe both twayne holy Sainctes in heaven, and shall continue there friends for euer, So I verily truste, and shall therefore hartelye pray, that thoughe your Lordshippes have nowe here in the

> earthe bine Judges to my condemnaction, we may yeat herafter in heaven meerily all meete together, to our euerlasting saluacion. . . .

More was a condemned man. He had nothing to gain by sounding a conciliatory note. And yet he not only prayed for his executioners' everlasting salvation, but expressed his desire to meet them in heaven. It takes courage to die for one's beliefs, more courage than most of us have. But it takes true sainthood to desire to be "friends forever" with one's enemies. More believed that there was something larger than his outstanding political career—the good of the people, the truth of his convictions and the love for neighbor that bridges the deepest enmity, all three values rooted in "the absolute priority of God." What a politician!