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## 9/11 in Perspective: Thomas More — A Man for *This* Season

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In 1929, G.K. Chesterton said, “Blessed 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 100 years’ time.”

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### Conflict of Interest?

The prophetic import of Chesterton’s words has become increasingly poignant in our own time.

My introduction to Thomas More came, as it has with many, through viewing Robert Bolt’s 1966 cinematic masterpiece, *A Man for All Seasons*. I first saw the film in 1977 which, providentially, occurred shortly before I left for a year of graduate study abroad in England through the University of San Diego’s Oxford program. It was providential because that year happened to coincide with the 500th anniversary of More’s birth and an outstanding exhibition of his life and times at the National Portrait Gallery in London. My immersion in the works of Thomas More throughout that year began a lifetime devotion to this patron saint of lawyers, judges, and statesmen.

As I learned about the momentous challenges More faced in his own day, I became keenly aware of how fortunate we were to live in a time and place in which we would presumably be forever free from persecution for our sincerely held religious beliefs. Now, a mere three decades later, it is clear to me that history does, indeed, repeat itself and that the lessons of More’s life and death are absolutely invaluable in contemporary times.

Over the last two years, as lead counsel in the efforts to preserve the Mt. Soledad Cross

in San Diego, I have become acutely aware of the magnitude of the anti-Christian bias in our own society. For example, when I was retained to represent the City of San Diego *pro bono* in this controversy, my opponent stated on the record in court that the city hiring of a Christian attorney to represent it in the case concerning the Mt. Soledad Cross was analogous to the city hiring the Ku Klux Klan to represent it in a desegregation case. The liberal Superior Court Judge assigned to the case overruled my objection to such improper comments, and invited my adversary to proceed with his anti-Christian diatribe which, of course, he was only too happy to do.

When later interviewed by the press, my opponent stated that he did not mean to suggest that I was a racist, but rather: "How dare [the city] hire a Catholic attorney" to represent it in a religious freedom case. In ruling in favor of the atheist challenging the presence of the Mt. Soledad Cross on City property, the activist judge went so far as to state in her written opinion that it constituted an unconstitutional entanglement of government and religion for the City of San Diego to hire an attorney affiliated with a Catholic public-interest law firm to represent it in the case. It was solely this finding by the trial court that led the City Attorney of San Diego to conclude that it was a "conflict of interest" for me to continue to represent the city in the case.

### **Threats Within and Without**

So much for any of my previous naive illusions that Christians in general, or Catholics in particular, are now free from religious discrimination in this country. Current events are leading me to wonder if we are entering into another period of virulent anti-Catholicism, such as Thomas More experienced in England during the Protestant revolt of the early 16th century. Thomas More was martyred in large part for opposing Henry VIII's attack on the authority of the pope and the sanctity of marriage. Yet even today devout Catholics are being persecuted for speaking out against the relentless attacks on traditional marriage by the radical homosexual lobby in this country.

In California, the Catholic health care system is even under attack by those who would force Catholic physicians to perform abortions and *in vitro* fertilization procedures on lesbians. In Massachusetts, Catholic Charities is out of the adoption business for the first time in over 100 years, because it will not place children with homosexual couples, a violation of basic tenets of our religion. Increasing numbers of school children are being taught not only to tolerate, but to actively embrace the homosexual agenda. Conscience clauses are being eliminated from anti-Christian legislation that Catholic lawyers and judges will be asked to enforce against their brothers and sisters in the faith.

Elsewhere in the world the situation is even worse:

The world's 2.1 billion Christians are a religious minority in eighty-seven countries. The Geneva Report of 2002 estimates that up to 200 million Christians are being denied their full human rights, as defined by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, simply because they are Christians. Since 2000, there have been forty countries where at least one verifiable death attributable to anti-Christian violence has occurred. (Susan Brinkmann: "The Greatest Story Never Told: Modern Christian Martyrdom," *This Rock*, September 2006)

There are numerous parallels between More's day and our own that could explain the somewhat rapid spread of anti-Catholicism. I'd like to focus on two of the more notable engines of change that have characterized both More's time and our own.

The first is a strong trend toward secularization. In More's day, this was evident in the writings of the likes of Machiavelli, whose book *The Prince* was published in 1532. In that work, Machiavelli sought to divorce religion and morality from politics. The classic example is More's former friend and benefactor, Henry VIII — the once Catholic prince turned heretical tyrant. The writings of Machiavelli and anti-Catholic revolutionaries like Martin Luther helped fuel the Protestant Reformation and the persecution of faithful Catholics like Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher.

In our own day, we have witnessed a resurgence of secularism that reflects, at best, a sneering tolerance of those who still aspire to Christian ideals. That grudging tolerance is increasingly giving way to a legally enforced hostility to religion that has no room for traditional morality. In More's day, the invention of the printing press revolutionized the free flow of ideas, both good and bad. While it helped usher in a Renaissance of new learning, it also served as a vehicle by which heresy and sedition spawned anarchy and persecution. Five hundred years later, the widespread availability of the Internet has, in our own time, once again revolutionized the dissemination of information — both good and bad. Whereas the wisdom of the ages can now be summoned to our computer screens in an instant, so can anti-religious propaganda and unbridled immorality. The latter has greatly weakened the resolve of millions in the current culture war being waged against religion and traditional values in the world today.

The challenges in More's day came not only from within his society itself, but also from an external enemy in the form of radical Islam. In More's lifetime, the Muslim empire was threatening to conquer Christian Europe. The European powers were greatly weakened through infighting and discord and, in 1521, Muslim forces conquered Hungary. The papal legate to England pointed out to Henry VIII that all of Christendom, including England itself, was in the greatest danger from the Muslim threat. Now, 500 years later, the scourge of radical Islam is again upon us. It has been predicted that within this generation, even without violence, Islam will finally overcome much of Europe through a shift in demographics (see Mark Steyn: "It's the Demography, Stupid," *The New Criterion*, January 2006). Thus, the great Muslim threat to Europe, which first arose in More's lifetime, stands to achieve its objectives in our own.

With dire threats to our culture from within and without, how do we stand to fare any better than did Thomas More, who was a martyr to his faith? Of course, the answer lies in that faith itself. Contemporary with Thomas More was Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, who helped introduce a counter-reformation through a renewed commitment to Catholic orthodoxy. And, in our time, it is not surprising that it is the orthodox seminaries that are flourishing. Moreover, while secularism has been on the rise, faithful Catholics are banding together and forging alliances with evangelical Christians and devout Jews.

### **In God's Hands**

Once again, the Mt. Soledad Cross case is an excellent example, inasmuch as it has been a true ecumenical effort that has helped bring about a series of spectacular successes. Multi-denominational alliances have helped achieve victories at the ballot box, in Congress, and even through legal efforts to obtain a stay granted by the United States Supreme Court. All branches of the state and federal governments have become involved in the case and the prospect of ultimate victory in the United States Supreme Court is now better than ever — especially with five Catholics currently sitting on the Court.

With all our political and legal maneuvering, which even led me to be present in the Oval Office to watch President Bush sign the legislation regarding the Mt. Soledad Cross

which I helped draft, there is one lesson I have learned better than any other. That lesson is that regardless of the amount of effort expended and the degree of support and opposition, the outcome is ultimately in God's hands. Perhaps the best example of this is the result of the 54-day Miraculous Novena, prayed by a group of Catholics in San Diego, for the preservation of the Mt. Soledad Cross. At about the end of the first 27 days of the prayers for petition, Justice Kennedy of the United States Supreme Court issued a very rare stay of the federal court order to remove the cross by August 1, 2006. Then, on the 54th day of the Novena, which itself ended on August 1, 2006, the United States Senate, by unanimous consent, voted to transfer the Mt. Soledad property to the federal government, thereby mooting the effect of the federal court order to remove the cross from city property.

Saint Thomas More knew all too well that true devotion to the Eucharist, the rosary, and the Cross itself, are indispensable weapons in the spiritual battles that confront all devout Catholics seeking to live their faith in an increasingly secular world. Like many of the veterans honored atop Mt. Soledad, Thomas More was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his beliefs. In his case, as his final words on the scaffold reflect, he died as "The King's good servant, but God's first." The ultimate question each of us has to answer in the difficult days that lie ahead is, "How far am I willing to go in the defense of my own faith?"

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