

***The Universe Newspaper - Universe Column***  
**July 11<sup>th</sup> 2010, by David Alton**

**In April, 1534, Sir Thomas More - former Speaker of the English House of Commons and Lord Chancellor in the House of Lords - refused to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy. As a consequence, on April 17<sup>th</sup> of that year, he was committed to the Tower of London. Found guilty of treason More was beheaded alongside Bishop Fisher on July 6, 1535.**

**Thomas More's final words on the scaffold were that he remained: "*The King's good servant, but God's First.*" In 1886 More was beatified and in 1935 he was canonized by Pope Pius XI as a saint of the Catholic Church. On October 31st, 2000, Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Thomas More, in addition to his role as patron saint of lawyers, to be patron saint of statesmen and politicians.**

**In September Thomas More will be much in the thoughts of English Catholics when Pope Benedict XVI speaks to Parliamentarians in Westminster Hall – speaking from the steps where More was tried.**

**More's relevance to us grows stronger with every passing day. This was something which G.K. Chesterton foresaw in 1929, when he wrote: *'It will remain a permanent and determining fact, a hinge of history, that he (More) saw, in the first hour of madness, that Rome and Reason are one...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 a hundred years time.'***

**That importance grows because of both the continuing struggle to present Faith and Reason as one and because of the struggle to present the Christian case in a hostile world.**

**Thomas More would have had little time for some of the iconoclasts who hector today's politicians and who have no understanding of the possibilities that political life presents –**

what shades of grey have to be accommodated, how to create alliances with people who do not embrace all of your beliefs, how to reconcile conscience with what is achievable, and how far you can reasonably go before you have to say no – and pay whatever price is required.

This understanding of the realities of political life and of what can be achieved was well expressed in Thomas More's advice that:

*'you must labour to guide affairs by indirection, so that you may handle everything as well as you are able, and what you cannot turn to good, you may at least succeed in rendering least bad. In stormy weather you must not abandon ship merely because you are unable to control the winds...For all things could not possibly go well unless all men were good, and that I do not expect to see as yet for some few years'.*

More tells his beloved daughter, Margaret, that ultimately conscience comes before political expediency or personal survival:

*'Albeit that I know mine own frailty full well and the natural faintness of my own heart, yet if I had not trusted that God should give me strength rather to endure all things than offend him by swearing ungodly against my own conscience, you may be sure I would not have come here'*

He also insists that every Christian conscience needs to be formed:

*'by learning and good counsel and be sure that his conscience be such as it may stand with his salvation, or else reform it'*

More's own conscience was formed by great learning – and through intellectual intercourse with the great minds of Europe, men like Erasmus.

In our own time such possibilities still exist and Thomas More's heirs should seize them.

**Some weeks ago I was invited by the Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn to visit the new campus of the “*International Theological Institute* “(ITI), a Catholic university founded by Pope John Paul II in 1996.**

**In the summer of 2009 the institute moved its campus to the town of Trumau by Vienna in order to be better able to live up to one of its founding intentions to help with the new evangelization of Europe: the prerequisite of changing Europe’s political attitudes.**

**Students from literally all over the world flock to the beautiful campus - with at its heart a restored medieval castle - to receive the formation that the founders of our own Oxford and Cambridge universities so many centuries ago had in mind when they started these institutions.**

**Life on the campus of the ITI is centered on the chapel, the hall and the library. Students told me why they chose to travel thousands of miles from around the globe to study here. As a recent *YouTube* video about the Institute highlights, young men and women are attracted by the search for truth and the joyful Catholic community that is so rarely to be found at other universities.**

**They told me how the whole person, heart and mind, is lifted up here. Professors work with the students through the texts of the great masters of the classical and Judeo-Christian thought traditions. Not only do the students have the privilege to study exclusively in a seminar-style setting, they also live on a campus with a vibrant Catholic life that includes singles, young families, priests and religious. Daily mass is celebrated both in the Eastern and the Western rites and the Blessed Sacrament is exposed throughout the day in the beautiful 17<sup>th</sup> century baroque chapel. Here, the faith is really alive.**

**So when you are looking for a place in Europe where Catholic renewal actually takes place and where tomorrow’s leaders for**

Church and society are formed, then the ITI is the place to be. Details can be found at [www.iti.ac.at](http://www.iti.ac.at)

The Institute's students can study the full range of Theological degrees as well as a specialized degree in Marriage and Family studies. Unique for Europe is also the *Studium Generale* programme that the Institute offers - aimed at young people coming out of secondary school and needing a year of discernment – a “*gap-year*”- to decide on their further path in life. The programme offers students a deeper insight into the Christian world view through philosophy, theology, the arts and sciences and literature and history as the best possible general formation before going into specialized studies or a professional career. It is a place where conscience can be formed and men and women prepared for the battles which lie ahead.

The enthusiasm of the students is matched by the dedication of the professors. This is yet another fruit of the great papacy of John Paul II, underlining how visionary this pope was and how much his papacy will continue to bear fruits in the future. Here are the heirs of Thomas More and John Fisher – learning to be their country's good servants, but God's first.

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