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READING THE LIFE OF A SAINT— SIR THOMAS MORE

DANIEL J. MORRISSEY*

Reading the lives of the saints is a revered Catholic practice. But the stories of martyrs can be particularly unsettling, even more so since their blood has incontrovertibly been the seed of the church. One that I find personally quite troubling, as the father of a one year old, is the death of St. Perpetua. She was a noble Roman woman of the early third century, a recent convert, who was still nursing a child. Despite the anguished entreaties of her pagan father she refused to acknowledge the deity of the Emperor and her judgment was swift. She is reported to have kissed her baby, given him to her family, and gone bravely to meet the wild beasts.

Narratives like that remind one that the Catholic religion makes serious demands. And any of us fallible humans who have tried to practice it can't help but be impressed by the witness of those special people who have put it all on the line for their faith. Peter Ackroyd's acclaimed new biography of Sir Thomas More makes a mighty contribution to that tradition.

Ackroyd's book however raises two questions about More that have profound implications. Looking at More from our ecumenical age, can we truly say that he died for something worthwhile? And was it right, as Ackroyd reports, for More at his tragic end to rue all the worldly success that he had achieved?

Sir Thomas, in his famous self-description, was the King's good servant, but God's first. He *refused to* recognize Henry VIII as the supreme head of the Church in England, objecting that Henry's actions destroyed not just the unity of the church, but its freedom as well. It may be a bit much to call More a *precursor* of

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the separation of church and state. (As Chancellor, after all, he had sent several Protestants to the stake as heretics) Yet his actions, like Perpetua's, affirmed that religious faith cannot be true if it is subservient to totalitarian political power.

At an even deeper level, however, I believe More was taking a stand against the destruction of a way of life which *saw* this world as part of a divinely-ordered universe that manifested its Creator's love in every way. Some would be saved and some damned from all eternity in the coming Protestant dispensation. And the secular order that would follow would be similarly arbitrary and punitive, stripping away the great sacramental and communal comforts to human existence that medieval Catholicism afforded. More died, I believe, in protest against this harsh, new world of which we are now all too familiar with.

On the second issue, it was disturbing to read that More, while awaiting his execution in the tower, regretted that he had not lived his life in monastic seclusion. In my days in Catholic schools, More was just about the only saint I heard of who was not a priest or nun. You almost had to go back to Perpetua to find a saint who had a child. More's canonization seemed at least one recognition by the Church that a Catholic could be fully committed to this world and still lead a life pleasing to God.

In his early years More had lived for some time with a monastic community. Throughout his life he remained devoutly prayerful, but he was also very much a married man and a loving father. And of course he was totally involved in the affairs of this world, rising in the legal profession to become Lord Chancellor of the Realm. In addition, he was one of the leading scholars of the Northern Renaissance and author of the political classic *Utopia*, a humanistic statement about how people might live together in equality and harmony.

The aspirations of the Utopians were the exact opposite of what our contemporary society seems to consider the "good life." They were non-materialistic hedonists, people who believed that the highest pleasures of life come not from the enjoyment of consumer goods, but from loving interactions with one another and from the cultivation of knowledge and the arts. And More himself lived just such a life, not only with his family, but in his associations with business, political, and scholarly colleagues. In fact, others so enjoyed his companionship and charm that his renowned friend and Renaissance collaborator Erasmus called

More “the man for all seasons.”

Perhaps it should be no surprise that More, awaiting execution, would turn his attention from this world. But it seems to me that the author of *Utopia* could just as well have envisioned heaven as a continuation of the wonderful joys he had found on earth. The book of Revelations seems to hold out just that possibility when it describes the New Jerusalem as God coming to earth to live in eternal happiness with humans, wiping away every tear from their eyes.

And in one of his last acts More even anticipated such a world when he wrote to comfort his beloved daughter Margaret: “Pray for me and I will for you and we will meet merrily again in heaven.” I’m sure St. Perpetua looked forward to a similar reunion with her baby. For allowing us to believe in such a future, we owe a debt of gratitude to great ones like her and Thomas More.

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