

ad. veritatem

ST. THOMAS MORE SOCIETY OF ORANGE COUNTY

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Living
Backward
GREGORY WEILER



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LIVING BACKWARDS

GREGORY N. WEILER

Here we are in January, the time of “New Year’s resolutions.” The very phrase is so hackneyed, and hearing it almost makes me cringe. Apart from starting another month and year in this crazy legal practice and recovering from the holiday interruption of regular business, I haven’t even been trying to “resolve” new personal things.

However this year, one of my dearest friends died on New Year’s Eve. Good ol’ Joe was probably worried about the fiscal cliff thing and his exemption being lowered. Seriously, it was both a lovely and torturous six-month cancer journey with my good friend. I guess the same kind of mixture of grace and suffering that we think about when you meditate on the Passion of Christ.

This last weekend when we held Joe’s funeral I was privileged to give the eulogy. It was so gratifying to look back at a man’s life, in retrospect, a life so well spent. After a funeral with over 800 people and countless testimonies of loving impact, it was kind of intimidating. You know what kind of funeral will I have? Who will come to my funeral? Will there be seven priests at my funeral? Will my funeral be like Ebenezer Scrooge’s in a Christmas Carol, “I’ll attend but only if lunch is served.”

Cancer usually allows most people the time to mend fences and say what has to be said to loved ones. But none of us are guaranteed a lot of notice or time for preparation, apart from the lifetime each of us is granted. The gospel tells us to be intentional in our living and to be prepared.

I’ll share that my friend Joe’s life started out with 35 years of a life needing much redemption. As a mid-30’s New Jersey alcoholic, he turned his life around. He found Alcoholics Anonymous and then the Bible. He came back to the Church. Is it mere coincidence that Joe started out with the Ignatian spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous, then became a serious studier of the Bible, then joined the full sacramental life of the Church, then bore the copious fruit of caring for the homeless, 15 years of prison ministry, sponsoring innumerable folks on Cursillo retreats and joyfully directing literally hundreds of lives back to a relationship with God. Coincidence, or Godincidence? I know that Joe would give all the credit to the grace of God but is it not a good thing to review a life well spent and learn some lessons.

Scripture study! Serious sacramental life! Service to those in need! All of the Matthew 25 admonitions regarding the naked, homeless, hungry and imprisoned. Not a bad road map for 2013.

May Joe rest in peace.

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The St. Thomas More Society of Orange County is an independent organization sponsored by lawyers and judges who are practicing members of the Roman Catholic Church.

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IDEALS OF ST. THOMAS MORE

The legal profession is a high calling with corresponding responsibilities to society. The principal objective of every lawyer is to promote and seek justice. Catholic Lawyers pursue the truth in both their spiritual and professional lives. The duty of a Catholic lawyer is to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, His Church and its teachings at all times despite the personal consequences.

THE OBJECTIVES OF STMS

- encouraging its members to live a Christian life and apply the principles and ideals exemplified by St. Thomas More in their lives and encourage same in the legal profession.
- promoting and foster high ethical principals in the legal profession generally and, in particular, in the community of Catholic lawyers.
- assisting in the spiritual growth of its members.
- encouraging interfaith understanding and brotherhood.
- sponsoring the annual Red Mass for

elected and appointed officials and members of the legal profession.

MEMBERSHIP IN STMS

Each member of the Society is committed to:

- strive to live an exemplary Christian life and apply the principles and ideals exemplified by St. Thomas More in their daily lives and encourage same in the legal profession.
- attend monthly meeting of the Society and provide personal support to the St. Thomas More Society.
- attend and support the Red Mass.

LAWYER’S PRAYER

Give me the grace, Good Lord, to set the world at naught; to set my mind fast upon thee and not to hang upon the blast of men’s mouths; to be content to be solitary; not to long for worldly company but utterly to cast off the world and rid my mind of the business thereof.
- ST. THOMAS MORE

EDITOR@STTHOMASMORE.NET

IF THERE IS NO GOD...

JOHN J. FLYNN III

“If there is no God, everything is permitted,” Ivan Karamazov’s famous aphorism. Perhaps there is no more there than the kind of poetic overstatement typical of the artist. Or perhaps there is a compelling logic to it, even the germ of an invincible argument for the existence of God.

2013 is the Year of Faith, not only a time for reflecting on faith, but also on the lack of it. About 15 years ago I retained as a consultant a former law professor of mine. During the consultation, I had dinner with him and the client, and we discussed faith in general and Catholicism in particular. The dinner occurred only a few years after my return to the Catholic Church, after a hiatus of nearly a quarter century. I explained the reasons for my return. The professor, a nationally known scholar in his field, then said, with deep feeling: “I envy you your faith.” He longed, so it seemed, for belief, but could not have it, as if he had walked miles to the door of that moment, and found it locked. I have been haunted many times since by the thought that Karamazov’s hypothesis could have provided the key, and that I failed to produce it at the right moment.

The cause of faith has not been helped lately by certain highly public members of the scientific community who contend we do not need God to explain the origin of the physical universe. (The arguments that the universe is a “free lunch” all appear to hinge on the existence, “before” the Big Bang, of a vacuum. A vacuum, however, is a something, and not a nothing; philosophers even now generally do better than scientists with the implications of nothingness and “somethingness.”) The point of this piece, however, is not to weigh into the debate on the origins of the physical universe, but to suggest that the existence of God is a necessary reality embedded in the very nature of morality itself.

1. All Moral Rules Presume the Existence of a Will.

The history of western moral philosophy is mainly one of various attempts to answer the question impliedly posed by *The Republic*: “Why should I be good?”

So many moral theories have failed because they have misidentified the objective, which is not to formulate a rule or a standard, but to identify a will: Every rule, every standard, is an expression of a will, addressed to another will. (Will has a central role in Kantian moral philosophy, but to an entirely different effect from the one suggested herein.) Whether the one who imposes the rule is God, the King, or Congress, every rule expresses a will, and no rule exists



unless it has been expressed by a will. Will, therefore, must pre-exist rule. The objective of moral philosophy then, is to identify the pre-existent (or antecedent, or a priori) will (as distinguished from an a priori rule or standard) that bears the right to enunciate the rule.

The will that has the right to decide must be an a priori reality; otherwise, choosing among competing moral systems becomes no more than a battle for dominance, whether at the ballot box or on the battlefield. There must, therefore, be a will that is not subject to second-guessing.

2. Only a Good Will May Impose Binding Moral Rules.

If a moral system or a rule is to be binding upon us, the rule must be for our good. We cannot be bound by the will of one who seeks evil for us, or more precisely, the will of one who cannot be trusted always and in every case to will our good. The imposition of a rule by one who wishes us evil can of course be no more than an act of war, which can have no binding effect.

There are certain other conclusions that appear to be compelled by what has already been established, that is, (1) that moral rules must always express an a priori will, and (2) that moral rules, to be binding, must always and in every case be for our good:

(a) **The A Priori Basis of Morality Is a Person.** A will presumes a person, of course, a being who has awareness and seeks relation. If such a being lacks at least those two attributes, he will be indifferent to our actions. That will should require a personality may seem obvious, but it is a point worth highlighting nevertheless.

(b) **The Person Must Be All Good.** The will that has the right to impose moral rules must be all good. Every act of will for another’s good is an act of love, and there can be

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in one who has the right to make rules no possibility, as already established, of willing evil, and not because the one who rules is not free to choose evil, but because he can be trusted in his freedom (see below) never to do us evil, and only to do us good. In other words, it is in the nature of this being that he is all good, and wills only our good.

(c) **The Person Must Be Free of All Imperfections.** A will that is all good can only be the will of one who is both perfect and eternal. It is not a will that can be subject to any weakness or imperfection, such as the mortality or contingency of created beings, or any imperfection creative of need that could lead to self-seeking to our ultimate detriment.

(d) **The Nature of This Person Must Encompass Both Will and Rule.** Both will and rule must be reposed in the a priori reality that serves as the basis of morality. Kant ultimately concluded that even the acts of God were subject to measurement against an a priori moral standard. But if even the acts of God are subject to such a measurement, because we know that

every standard expresses a will, we are faced with the possibility of an endless cascade of rules and standards, on the one hand, and wills on the other. If, therefore, a moral system is truly to provide an a priori moral basis, will and rule must, as it were, be reposed in one being. Therefore, the only way out of this potential conundrum is to say, with St. John, that not only does God love (love as the standard), but that God *is* love.

In opposition, one could argue with considerable force that the American style of democratic government has identified a different will that has the right to impose rules, i.e., the will of the people, who impose rules on themselves, subject to the constitutional protections provided to minority views and populations by the Bill of Rights. That reasoning, however, is flawed: If it is presumed that the human rights of minorities must be protected against the will of the majority, then it is also presumed that the will of the majority is subject to the constraints of an antecedent (or a priori) moral rule that protects the rights of minorities. So whose will expresses that antecedent rule? Perhaps that rule, too, is expressed by the will of the people, in the Bill of Rights. But the American Constitution is subject to amendment, which

necessarily leads us to the conclusion that even the American constitutional system must be subject to some antecedent standard. For example, it is theoretically possible to amend out of the Constitution all of the rights and freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights. Is there a moral standard to which even the Constitution is therefore subject? The American answer to that question coincides perfectly with the logic of Ivan Karamazov’s “moral theory”: The standard to which even the bulwark of the Constitution is subject is the natural law, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, and the Declaration, with unassailable logic, correctly acknowledges the natural law as an expression of the will of the Creator. Only there, as Ivan Karamazov implied, can we find the needed stopping point for moral analysis. Amending the Constitution to repeal the Bill of Rights would not be unconstitutional, but it would violate the natural law principles articulated in the Declaration.

“If there is no God, everything is permitted.” And if everything is not permitted, if some things are right, and some things are wrong, then God, according to the logic traced above, must surely exist. ♦

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MONTH	DATE	DESCRIPTION	LOCATION
February	Wed., Feb. 20, 12:00 p.m.	Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P., will speak on contemplative prayer.	Jilio Ryan 14661 Franklin, #150 Tustin, California jilioryan.com
	Sun., Feb. 24, 8:30-11:30 a.m.	Come to help cook and serve breakfast to the homeless of the community at Isaiah House. www.ocatholicworker.org	Isaiah House 316 S. Cypress Avenue Santa Ana, CA 92701 (714) 835-6304

A MAN FOR THIS SEASON, AND ALL SEASONS

ARCHBISHOP CHARLES J. CHAPUT
ARCHBISHOP OF PHILADELPHIA

A day after the 2012 Summer Olympics closed in London, Joseph Pearce wrote that he felt like his “body had been covered in slime. I also felt a great sense of gratitude that I had shaken the smut and dirt from my sandals and had left the sordid culture of which I was once a part.”

Given the grand sweep of British history, those are harsh words from a former Londoner. An English Catholic convert and author, Pearce is now a resident Fellow at Thomas More College in New Hampshire. But he merely said what many people thought: that the Olympic closing ceremony they watched on global television was one long liturgy of overripe vulgarity, a jamboree of cheesy and offensive pop culture. In effect, it showcased a nation grasping to reinvent itself by escaping back to adolescence while ignoring its own real past.

This shouldn’t surprise us. Europe’s work of reinvention, or self-delusion, has been going on for decades, not only in Britain but across the continent. One of the key obstacles to the process is the depth of Europe’s Christian roots. As recent popes and many others have pointed out, there really is no “Europe” without its historic Christian grounding. Anyone wanting a new Britain, or a new Europe, needs to get rid of the old one first. So diminishing Christianity and its influence becomes a priority. And that includes rewriting the narrative on many of Christianity’s achievements and heroes.

By way of evidence: Consider the case of Thomas More, lawyer, humanist, statesman and saint; martyred by England’s King Henry VIII in 1535; canonized in 1935; celebrated in Robert Bolt’s brilliant 1960 play *A Man for All Seasons*; and more recently trashed as proud, intolerant, and devious in Hilary Mantel’s best-selling 2009 novel, *Wolf Hall*, now set for release as a 2013 BBC2 miniseries.

Critics of More are not new. His detractors had a voice well before his beheading. As Henry VIII’s chancellor, he earned a reputation as a hammer of heretics and a fierce opponent of Martin Luther and William Tyndale. Yet Erasmus of Rotterdam revered More as a scholar and friend. Jonathan Swift, the great Anglo-Irish writer, described him as “a person of the greatest virtue this kingdom [of England] ever produced.” When Pope John Paul II named Thomas More as patron saint of statesmen in 2000, he cited More’s witness to



the “primacy of truth over power” at the cost of his life. He noted that even outside the Church, More “is acknowledged as a source of inspiration for a political system which has as its supreme goal the service of the human person.”

Ten years later, speaking to leaders of British society in Westminster Hall, Pope Benedict XVI returned to the same theme. Benedict noted that More “is admired by believers and non-believers alike for the integrity with which he followed his conscience, even at the cost of displeasing the sovereign whose ‘good servant’ he was, because he chose to serve God first.”

So which is it: More the saint or More the sinner? Was he the ruthless, sexually repressed rage addict suggested by historians like G.R. Elton, fearful of change and driven by helpless fury? Or was he the humble and generous “man for all seasons” praised by his friend Robert Whittinton and so many others among his contemporaries? Were there really two Thomas Mores: the young, open-minded humanist, and the older royal courtier, gripped by religious fanaticism?

The moral integrity of More’s life has been argued with persuasive skill in the various works of Gerard Wegemer, among many others. And Peter Ackroyd’s fine biography, *The Life of Thomas More*, vividly captures the whole extraordinary man—his virtues, his flaws, and the decisive nature of his moment in history. Travis Curtright has now added to the luster of the real More’s legacy with his excellent new book *The One Thomas More*.

As the title suggests, Curtright sees Thomas More’s life as a consistent, organic record of Christian witness, start to finish;

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a thoroughly logical integration of humanism, piety, politics and polemical theology. There is only “one” Thomas More—a man of tender nobility, subtle intellect, and forceful conviction, all rooted in profound fidelity to the larger commonwealth of Christendom outside and above Tudor England. For Curtright, More embodied “the Erasmian ideal of wedding learning with virtue,” lived through a vigorous engagement with temporal affairs. He treats More’s scholarly critics with proper respect while methodically dismantling their arguments; and he does it by carefully unpacking and applying three of More’s most important written works: *The Life of Pico Mirandola*, *The History of Richard III*, and *Utopia*.

Curtright correctly sees that More’s real source of annoyance for many modern revisionist critics is his faith. If revisionists like Elton implicitly define “humanism” as excluding religious faith, then a man like Thomas More and the whole vast Christian tradition of integrating faith and reason become serious irritants. As Curtright observes:

The entire structures of the two Mores and real More theories congeal around [critics’] notions of a “true” humanism that excludes the possibility of faith and reason working together, a position transparently stated by [G.R.] Elton and one that influences contemporary condemnations of More as a “fanatic.”

Bickering over the “real” Thomas More has importance beyond the scholarly community. Why? Because just as the nutty premises of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* confused millions by reinventing the backstory of

Christian belief, so too the novel *Wolf Hall* offers a revisionist Thomas More wrapped in popular melodrama. The author, Hilary Mantel, a lapsed Catholic whose disgust for the Church is a matter of public record, drew her portrait of More in part from the work of Elton. The “hero” of her novel is Thomas Cromwell—More’s tormentor, and in reality, a man widely loathed by his contemporaries as an administratively gifted but scheming and vindictive bully. Unlike the widespread European shock that greeted More’s judicial murder, few wept for Cromwell when he finally followed More to the scaffold.

The One Thomas More is not a book for beachside browsing. While it’s well-written, modest in size and rich in content, it is a scholarly effort. Some casual readers may find it heavier than they bargained for. But as a resource on Thomas More, it’s invaluable. Curtright’s final chapter, “Iconic Mores on Trial,” has special importance. It directly challenges Mantel’s loose treatment of facts, for which it deserves wide circulation.

Having said all this, Thomas More has been dead nearly 500 years. Why should his legacy matter today?

Barring relief from the courts, Christian entities, employers, and ministers in the coming year will face a range of unhappy choices. As the Affordable Care Act takes force and the HHS contraceptive mandate imposes itself on Christian life, Catholic and other Christian leaders can refuse to comply, either declining to pay the consequent fines in outright civil disobedience, or trying to pay them; they can divest themselves of their impacted Christian institutions; they can seek some unexplored compromise or way of circumventing the law; or they can simply give in and comply with the government coercion under protest.

Good people can obviously disagree on the strategy to deal with such serious

matters. But the cost of choosing the last course—simply cooperating with the HHS mandate and its evil effects under protest—would be bitterly high and heavily damaging to the witness of the Church in the United States. Having fought loudly and hard for religious liberty over the past year, in part because of the HHS mandate, America’s Catholic bishops cannot simply grumble and shrug, and go along with the mandate now, without implicating themselves in cowardice. Their current resolve risks unraveling unless they reaffirm their opposition to the mandate forcefully and as a united body. The past can be a useful teacher. One of its lessons is this: The passage of time can invite confusion and doubt—and both work against courage.

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Again: Why does Thomas More still matter? Why does he matter right now?

More’s final work, scribbled in the Tower of London and smuggled out

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READING 48

We must proclaim simultaneously the complementary and paradoxical aspects of the Christian mystery.

It is necessary, alas, to state that we do in fact often have the tendency to think by oppositions. Today, it is unfortunately a very widespread method of thinking (or rather, of not thinking). We perpetually see artificial oppositions reappear in the problems that touch our faith, Christian existence, the life of the Church. You have certainly heard this many times: love of God is opposed to love of neighbor, contemplation to action, personal salvation to collective salvation, authority to freedom of spirit, zeal for the Church to openness to the world, charism to institution, faith to religion, Word to sacrament, etc. None of this reflects genuine thought.

All life is synthesis. The life of the Christian mystery is synthesis par excellence. It is always an equilibrium of fullness. We must proclaim simultaneously the complementary and paradoxical aspects of the

Christian mystery. In this resides all its grandeur: the Christian mystery is a whole, a mysterious whole. Now, out of analyses which can be illuminating, out of distinctions which can be real, one too often fabricates dichotomies, one effects dissociations, one creates deadly oppositions. It sometimes seems that this is a spirit “inspired by the devil” who seeks to “transform into grounds for opposition” what should be kept “in a spirit of concord” (Y. Congar).

One of the concerns of Vatican II was precisely to bring out this synthetic character of the Church’s reality and of the doctrine of faith. And this is also true of the texts which it devoted to the priesthood. To receive them in truth, it is a poor method to quote only half of them in order to oppose them to the past: it is necessary, on the contrary, to place them back in the great unifying vision of Scripture and tradition.

- *Henri de Lubac, The Motherhood of the Church (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 360-363, footnotes omitted, emphasis in original.*

A MAN FOR THIS SEASON, AND ALL SEASONS

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before his death, was *The Sadness of Christ*. In it, he contrasts the focus and energy of Judas with the sleepiness of the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane. He then applies the parable to his own day and the abject surrender of England’s bishops to the will of Henry VIII: “Does not this contrast between the traitors and the Apostles

present to us a clear and sharp mirror image. . . a sad and terrible view of what has happened through the ages from those times to our own? Why do not bishops contemplate in this scene their own somnolence?”

More urges the bishops not to fall asleep “while virtue and the faith are placed in jeopardy.” In the face of Tudor bullying, he begs them, “Do not be afraid”—this from a layman on the brink of his own execution.

Of course, that was then. This is now.

America 2012 is a very long way, in so many different ways, from England 1535.

But readers might nonetheless profit in the coming months from some reflection on the life of Sir Thomas. We might also take a moment to remember More’s friend and fellow martyr, John Fisher, the only bishop who refused to bend to the king’s will; the man who shortly before his own arrest told his brother bishops: “. . . the fort has been betrayed even [by] them that should have defended it.” ♦