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THE PRAISE OF UTOPIA



VIGOUR OF ERASMUS AND RELIC OF MORE

It took Desiderius Erasmus only one week in the August of 1509—exactly 500 years ago—to write ‘In Praise of Folly’ Erasmus had created his most famous literary work while staying at the house of London lawyer Thomas More to whom he had it dedicated. Using irony, a well-known device since the times of Antiquity, the author of this masterpiece makes Folly praise herself, as she is ascribing all oddities of the world to her own credit.

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Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus

Already an eminent philosopher of his time, Erasmus describes the professions of More and himself thusly: “Among all scholars, lawyers claim to have the first place, they are notorious for their utmost self-conceit... (A)ll in the same breath they quote hundreds of laws and have no concern for the relevance thereof... only to make their trade appear the most sophisticated of all... These are followed by philosophers who believe that they alone have the true wisdom, while all other mortals are groping in the dark... knowing close to nothing, they imagine themselves to have learned everything.”

Every evening, when the lawyer (More) returned home from the court, the philosopher (Erasmus) read to him the pages he had written during this day. The ensuing discussions were held in Latin, since Erasmus could not speak English, and More did not know a word of Flemish. These two idealists had, in fact, co-authored the book, which was raising the fundamental question: “Who is to blame?” for the situation, whereby European religious, academic and state institutions had found themselves in the deepest crisis; being at odds both with the spiritu-

ality of the Christian faith and that of Renaissance Humanism and at times even lacking common sense.

Erasmus’ foreword to his ‘*In Praise of Folly*’ glorifying the wit, erudition and integrity of Thomas More, had almost immediately brought the then 30-year old lawyer international fame, since during the author’s lifetime this book had gone through nearly 40 editions, finding avid readers in all the countries of Western Europe.

This reputation and Erasmus’ support had created conditions for the distribution and recognition (7 years later, in 1516) of a small volume penned by Thomas More and entitled ‘*Utopia*’, which just as seriously influenced the future of many countries (including Russia). In his ‘*Utopia*’, More presented his vision of a political and social system that left no place for poverty nor for mindless physical drudgery and where everybody was happy. This book tries to answer yet another fundamental question: “*Que faire?*”

Afterwards, Thomas More reached the highest position ever taken by Humanists of that time by becoming Lord Chancellor of the English government and, as such, tried to bring to life some of his utopian ideals, which were shared by Erasmus. Thomas More stood for his principles of justice even in the face of the fearsome sovereign Henry VIII, who finally had the former beheaded in 1535. Standing on the scaffold and looking his death straight in the eye, Thomas More had managed to answer the sarcastic question asked in Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*: “What should become of our philosophers when they see iron used against them, if they tremble with fear even during a mere verbal duel?”

Erasmus outlived his friend by just one year, quietly passing away at the height of violence that had seized the whole of Europe and had transformed his idea of ecclesiastic purification and social reform into the bloodbath of the Reformation and the death-fires of the Inquisition. The Marxist doctrine had given Thomas More a label of utopian socialist, whereupon several generations of Soviet people were sent to “dig spuds” in an attempt to embody the habitually-misconstrued More idea for seasonal interactions between the rural and the urban workforce. The Catholic Church, for its part, had raised More to sainthood, making him the holy patron of politicians.

The author of this article was lucky to have discovered in Brugge (Bruges)—the town in Belgium where More had written his *Utopia*—a cultural relic yet unknown to the world. It consists of several cervical vertebrae (i.e. neck bones) of the author of *Utopia* (I am sure they are his), hidden in the wooden frame of a 16th century copy of his portrait.

In England, when More was decapitated, it was common practice to bury the bodies of executed criminals secretly, while throwing away their cut off heads into the river Thames. But More's daughter, Margaret, was able to salvage her father's severed head by bribing his executioner. Such misdemeanour had almost resulted in her criminal prosecution. Almost 300 years later, the last childless female scion of the More family brought a copy of her famous ancestor's portrait, in the frame of which were hidden several More's neck bones, to Brugge, where this relic has been preserved to the present day, unknown to all.

My discovery was suggested by the guidebook to Brugge, which stated that at the English Catholic convent tourists could see the famous



Thomas More

'Portrait of Sir Thomas More' by Hans Holbein the Younger. But this could not be true, I thought, since one of the two known original author's copies was on permanent display at the Flick Gallery in New York and the other was in Zagreb. Visiting the convent, I discovered only a rather mediocre copy of the Holbein original. However, this copy appeared to have been made almost at the same time as the original. After my long inquiries and explanations, an aged English nun showed me the bones — in the specially patterned recess under the glass cover. It turned out that neither Vatican, nor any of English or U.S. Catholic churches named after St. Thomas More; not even the Thomas More Research Centre at the University of Dallas (TX) knew anything about this relic. This can be explained by the fact that More was raised to sainthood only in 1935, i.e. 400 years after his tragic death, and until that time his remains had not yet acquired the status of a sacred relic.

Nevertheless, all pieces perfectly fit together. The last childless female scion of the More family (whom I have already mentioned) was Mary More. She had moved to Brugge to become the abbess of this English convent, which she then defended from the Jacobean plunder in the late 18th century; and where, finally, she died and was buried. To be absolutely sure, one can perform a DNA identification test, using which the Holy See recently verified the remains of Apostle Paul, one of the founders of the Christian Church.

As for members of the Russian political elite, they might need to visit Brugge and pay homage to the great patron of politicians, whom Erasmus used to call "The Man for All the Ages." Just as useful would be to read carefully these lines from *In Praise of Folly*: "Here is one... who pronounces eulogies to some ruler, while another calls for war with the Turks. One foretells the future, and the next one brings up numerous issues — all of them increasingly vain and petty. They are confident they are doing their duty honestly, if they are daily coming up with more and more ways to fill their own coffers by depriving other citizens of their hard-earned property."

Maybe the relic of Thomas More still could be of some help. ■