Sir Thomas More and *Utopia*; Machiavelli and *The Prince*

How Can Justice and the Good Life Be Achieved in Human Society?

Read the selection below. You will use it as a background.

Thomas More (1478–1535) was not the first to ponder the above question. Centuries before, Plato had wrestled with that quandary in *The Republic,* and many of the ideas and some of the philosophy of *The Republic* can be seen in More's work.

*Utopia* was actually two books. Book one was a vigorous critique of early Tudor society in Great Britain; book two was an account of a mythical island, *utopia,* which means "no such place."

In this "what if" book, More seemed to be suggesting that if a government were perfect, and its citizenry were perfect, this is what they would be like. Sir Thomas More may have indeed asked himself: If there was a place where human reason alone ordered affairs for the general good, what would it be like? His answer was *Utopia.* The word over the centuries has come to suggest the perfect, the unattainable.

*Utopia* asks a crucial question: What are the basic principles upon which a good society is organized? It presents a vision of a nation at peace with itself and its neighbors. Within this land, all worked freely for the welfare of everyone, and each had access to the wealth they all created. There was no slavery, no oppression of the weak by the strong. There was no ruthless power based on an intolerable concentration of wealth in a few hands.

While this may, in modern times, suggest communism, the actual driving force behind More's creation of the island paradise was his belief in true Christian ideals and practices. More looked at his British society and saw material well-being, desire for personal property, social classes and inequity. He saw the very rich growing constantly richer, paying only lip service to Christian ideals of love and spiritual well-being. He saw the very poor in eternal bondage because of their economic deprivation.

More wrote *Utopia* because he wanted government and the Church to reestablish those lost principles of Christian faith.

A devoted family man and devout Catholic, More was the first layman to be named Lord Chancellor of England. Ironically, he grew up in London within view of the famous Tower. It is not likely he could have imagined the sequence of events which would one day take him to that dark place where he would mount the steps to the scaffold, and martyrdom.

Schooled first in the learning center attached to St. Anthony's Hospital, More later entered the household of Archbishop Morton at
Lambeth where he continued his formal training. From there he went to Oxford to study law. While still a young lawyer, he married and began a term as a burgess in Parliament, the last Parliament in the reign of Henry VII.

Henry VII died in April, 1509 and his son, Henry VIII, was crowned on June 24. He was the first son to follow a father on the throne of England in sixty years. More wrote congratulatory verses in Latin to the new monarch, for he regarded the young king as the herald of a new era of peace and learning. In the years that followed, More became respected and well known in his law career and gained fame as a writer as well. When the king (hoping to have a separation of Church and state by appointing a nonclergyman to the position) asked him to become Lord Chancellor, More at first refused, and then accepted the position.

This decision cost him his life. Eventually, the confrontation with Henry VIII on divorce and remarriage, which violated Church laws, could not be resolved. On Church law and fidelity to its principles, More would not be moved. After a trial on July 1, 1535, he was charged with treason and sentenced to death. On July 6, after being admonished by a messenger that the king hoped More would not be “too wordy” before the execution, the aging statesman was beheaded.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), by contrast, was a Florentine who was active in politics in that Italian city-state, where bloodshed and destruction were often part of the political process. Author of several plays and histories, he achieved universal fame for his manual of politics, *The Prince*.

For more than a decade, he served as the secretary to the Chancery of Florence, where he helped to shape the policies of the government and traveled as a diplomat to other parts of the world. When the government he served was overthrown, Machiavelli was exiled by the new rulers.

Resentful, bitter, and disillusioned, Machiavelli lived a hermitlike existence in the country, where he wrote a dissertation of political procedure that came to be titled *The Prince*.

The small book glorified the qualities of force and slyness, and indeed, sanctioned any activity deemed necessary by a prince to maintain firm and complete authority and rule. Remembering the chaos and confusion of city-state politics in Italy, Machiavelli believed the only means of preventing such disorder was the establishment of a strong and all-powerful government. To keep order and protect the state, the head of government should use any available means, and, if necessary, ignore moral values. Treaties could be broken, lies told, opponents executed, and wars fought to keep and expand the ruler’s power and control.