
Political life, the path to holiness for the laity. A clear message against populism

On June 19, Pope Francis recognised *the heroic virtues* of French statesman Robert Schuman (1886-1963), marking a significant step on the long path to beatification. Robert Schuman, German-born lawyer and practising Catholic, became a French citizen in 1918 after the region of Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. On the same date, Alcide De Gasperi became an Italian citizen when Trentino was returned to Italy. Elected into the French Parliament in 1919, Schuman actively promoted the specific features of his region, notably the concordat with the Holy See aimed at preserving the "Christian soul" of Lorraine and Alsace within the framework French secularism. Arrested by the Nazis and deported to Germany in 1940, he managed to escape in 1942 and went into hiding in the south of France where he joined the Résistance until France was liberated. After World War II he was again elected MP with the Christian Democrats (Mouvement Républicain Populaire). As a statesman, he rose to great prominence. He was Minister of Finance (1946-1947), Prime Minister (1947-1948), Foreign Minister (1948-1952). *Most notably, Schuman was an architect of European integration, and especially of the project that paved the way to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community.* (Declaration of May 9, 1950 in the famous Salon de l'Horloge at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris). His prime concern was to secure lasting peace throughout a continent torn apart by wars through French-German reconciliation. Peace was for him the paramount objective. He firmly believed it was necessary to pursue a true common destiny marked by a highly pragmatic approach, which he later epitomised in the political manifesto and monograph *Pour l'Europe*, published in 1963. As a member of the Franciscan Third Order, Robert Schuman led a remarkably modest life and made no secret of his religious beliefs. He nourished his soul with daily readings from the Gospel and the Pontifical Magisterium. *Declared "venerable" by the Catholic Church, he joins Giorgio La Pira and Giuseppe Lazzati, previously recognised for their "heroic virtues",* while the process toward sainthood of Alcide De Gasperi, Igino Giordani and Luigi Sturzo is underway at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Speaking to the Missionary Student League of Italy on 30 April 2015, Pope Francis asked: "Can a Catholic engage in politics?". The pontiff himself promptly replied, "He must!". He added, quoting his predecessors Pius XI and Paul VI that "politics is one of the highest forms of charity, because it seeks the common good. [...] In the Church there are many Catholics who engaged in clean healthy politics; and those who have fostered peace among Nations. Think of the Catholics here, in Italy, after the war: think of De Gasperi. Think of France: Schumann, who has a cause for beatification. One can become a saint through politics." *In fact, from Pope Pius XII onwards, subsequent pontiffs have consistently encouraged lay faithful to engage in politics.* John Paul II made it a moral obligation in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* on the vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church of December 30, 1988: "In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good." Contemporary society fosters the holiness of action, societal holiness, the precondition for which is the harmonisation of inner life and commitment, each complementing the other in the pursuit of political vocation. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Archbishop of Milan, used to refer to the vocation of the "lay faithful to holiness." The same message was conveyed by Pope Wojtyla when in the year 2000 he proclaimed Saint Thomas More (1478-1535) "patron of statesmen and politicians." *The reasons for the Pope's decision deserves special reflection: providing the political world with credible models, reminding us that human governance is above all an exercise in virtue.* The Church has hitherto beatified personalities engaged in social activity chiefly through the agency of religious congregations. The beatification of contemporary, 20th century, politicians engaged in political life in their capacity as parliamentarians

or mayors, such as Schuman or La Pira, would send a powerful message to Catholics in our present context marked by a crisis of democracy and rising populism.

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