As Lord Chancellor of England in the 16th century, Thomas More had a particularly close relationship with Henry VIII, who admired and counted on him. More’s faith, values, intellect, education and conscience had shaped him into a man of integrity, integrity which in its own way reflected positively — and thus usefully — on the king.

As Lord Chancellor of England, More was no puppet, and when demanded by the king to do something he considered unethical, he responded, in so many words, “I cannot.” More spent the last 15 months of his life imprisoned in the Tower of London for refusing to sanction Henry’s divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon and for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy. Alone in the drafty Bell Tower, he was permitted infrequent and painfully brief visits from his family and was increasingly deprived even of the books he loved to read.

The loneliness of those 15 months must have been torture for this active family man, this man of deep faith, this man of conviction.

More turned his place of confinement into a cell of prayer; and much of what he wrote during that time were prayers or meditations on the faith. He kept a daily journal of his thoughts and feelings. His writing — more than any other — is deeply reflective of his faith and conscience and of his love for his family and country.

We Catholics have every right to be proud of our American heritage, every right to be patriotic. St. Thomas More loved his country, loved the king. But quoting More’s renowned last words, we say in our own way that we, too, are “the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”