A Martyr's
Theology of Assent.
Reading Thomas More's
De Tristitia Christi

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Lorsqu'il était emprisonné à la Tour de Londres, Thomas More a écrit une méditation détaillée du récit que font les Écritures de la passion du Christ au jardin de Gethsémani, dans le but de se préparer à son prochain martyr et de témoigner de cette expérience. Son De Tristitia Christi, écrit dans le contexte de contraintes morales et physiques, constitue une étude à caractère dévotionnel qui fournit à son auteur, et aux victimes de persécutions, un parcours transformant l'imitatio Christi du Moyen Âge tardif en une union quasi-mystique avec le Christ souffrant. Malgré que l'ouvrage de More repose sur une tradition populaire de méditation des Évangiles et de la vie du Christ, le traitement que fait More d'un seul épisode des Évangiles associe de manière originale la pratique de la lectio divina et de l'exégèse humaniste de la Renaissance.

Written from the Tower of London during his final months of imprisonment under increasing physical and mental duress, More's *De Tristitia Christi* (*The Sadness of Christ*) (1535) is the culmination of pre-Reformation English devotional prose, standing in a long line of spiritual writing that includes Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Nicholas Love. Its Christocentric vision explores Christ's agony in the garden as an icon of Christian suffering and offers a meditation on that theme as a vehicle of grace for those facing martyrdom. Significantly, More departs from traditional *vitae Christi* in concentrating his meditation on a single episode, and even more particularly in selecting Gethsemane rather than Golgotha—that is, on the struggle which facilitated the sacrifice itself. In the agony of accepting his own death, Christ becomes the type for More himself when confronting his own unwillingness to undergo the ultimate *imitatio Christi*. *The Sadness of Christ* provides just

such a rhetoric of assent. Whether it is an authentic record of More's own process of self-persuasion is impossible to say with certainty, but that More thought it sufficient to serve others is clearly evident from the care he took to present the case for martyrdom as persuasively (and gently) as possible.

Just as Christ's care for his followers contributed to his agony in accepting death, so too did More know his decision threatened his family, caught in its wake. It was, he wrote to his daughter Margaret, a "deadly grief unto me, and moch more deadly than to here of mine owne death."¹ More's struggle between charity and self-interest remains lightly veiled in *The Sadness of Christ*, which concentrates on cultivating the will's desire to do God's bidding. His concern for his family, however, is more explicit in his final letters, which serve as a sort of Rosetta stone to his Tower works. They also reveal his struggle to master his fears in the face of increasingly violent threats against his life, another theme that is veiled in his meditation on the agony in the garden. *The Sadness of Christ* focuses on the successful resolution of Jesus' struggle—and as such is clearly intended for a wider audience of future Christians who might find themselves in similar circumstances. Christ's attempt to wake the sleeping disciples becomes a "paradigm"² for More's own telling of the crisis confronting him and all would-be martyrs, beginning with such of his contemporaries as Bishop Fisher, and the Carthusians already imprisoned and facing execution. His meditation on Christ's agony in the garden—alone, without witnesses—not only draws together the fear and isolation of the scene, but just as importantly displays the need to tell the story of the fearful martyr transformed by grace.

More had drunk deeply from the English sources of affective piety: as a young man he lived for four years as a guest of the London Carthusians, who were among the major producers of such authors as Walter Hilton, Richard Whitford, Thomas à Kempis, and Richard Rolle. While there he himself wrote an English *Life of Pico*, followed years later by an unfinished version of *The Four Last Things* (both works of devotion were written before the Lutheran controversies made it necessary to defend traditional teachings on grace and human ability to respond). As a successful lawyer and king's servant in Chelsea, More spent each Friday in his private chapel in prayer and meditation, and the religious observances of his household are noted by his earliest biographers to the most recent.³ More's later career as a polemicist has been increasingly well-documented following the appearance of the Yale *Complete Works* series of his writings. From his response to Luther in 1521 to his final "Letter" to John Frith in 1533 on the cusp of his own imprisonment, More was England's most prolific and virulent Catholic apologist. One of the primary foci of religious division touched the very marrow of the western

Church: in what way was grace available to the Christian? Was there any thing that man could do to assist in his own salvation? More's long controversy with Tyndale, for example, offered an exhaustive defense of current teaching on grace resting largely on the legitimacy of existing rituals within the Church. By emphasizing the visible, corporate, and multinational body of the Church as a dispenser of grace, More was, of course, attempting to preserve both its integrity and its unity.⁴ His primary concern was for the integrity of the institutional Church and its sacramental system.

Less developed, then, was a notion of how an individual appropriates the grace made available in an ordinary, non-sacramental way. Here, the Catholic understanding of grace posits that God adds to our own unsatisfactory efforts at doing good. With the understanding that we, as rational creatures, can and must make the effort: "God draws the rational creature to a participation of the divine good above the condition of nature."⁵ The key elements of this Thomistic definition are that God initiates and man responds, and that grace supplements the natural effort of a rational being. We can and must respond if we are to cooperate with grace. Against the notion that we are powerless even to respond without grace, More notes that if men intend a good thing, it is already a sign of God's grace, "for elles they coulde not so do/ and that [God] is redy with his grace to walke forward with them. And syth theyr endeouore toward god is good: therefore yf they wyll styll perceyuer and walke on styll with god, he wyll walke on styll with them."⁶ Men must do what is in their power and God will supply the lack. To this end, works of popular devotion had aimed at recruiting the will for Christ. Largely, production of works of this nature was put on hold while the extraordinary violence of the polemical battles consumed a generation of writers, both Protestant and Catholic. In an irony he would enjoy and exploit, More could once again take up his interest in devotional writings only during his self-imposed retirement, or later from a prison cell.

When the political battle for control of the English Church was lost to the Royal Supremacy, other areas remained in contention for a while. Catholic teaching on the notion of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist was one such area of contention, and More began an English work laying out eucharistic doctrine as simply and persuasively as possible. But having resigned his public offices, and under increasing suspicion for his outspoken resistance to official government policies, More had to tread warily. Thus, shortly before his imprisonment he began a handbook of Eucharistic devotion: the *Treatise on the Passion* and the *Treatise on the Blessed Body*. While not entirely free from criticism of current events, this treatise (for despite the two separate titles, added later, it is a single work) is substantially different

from his polemics in tone, subject, and intent: “[I]t is not my present purpose to dispute the matter” he claims in the *Treatise upon the Passion*, “but to show and set forth the truth before the eyes of the reader, that he may rather of the truth read, increase in faith, and conceive devotion.”⁷

More wrote two further devotional works while in the Tower under close scrutiny: the English *Dialogue of Comfort* and the Latin *De Tristitia Christi* (*The Sadness of Christ*). Both explore the nature of suffering for one’s religion with a clear understanding that there would be many in England who would need such guides in the years to come. Having left behind the rancour of debate, More’s prose regained its former buoyancy and even humour. The *Dialogue of Comfort* in particular has a broad universal appeal, so much so that in an irony astonishing even by sixteenth-century standards, Archbishop Cranmer, More’s erstwhile adversary and the architect of England’s new liturgy, found it excellent reading while awaiting his own execution in the Bocardo in 1555. Upon learning that More was its author, Cranmer once again lamented the unfortunate execution of the former Lord Chancellor.⁸ It is unlikely, however, that the archbishop would have similarly enjoyed *The Sadness of Christ*, whose barbs he would have felt more sharply. In this later work More decried those who betray Christ in all his forms: physical, in the handing over of Jesus; sacramental, in the changes to the Eucharist; and mystical, in the breaking of Church unity.

The *Dialogue of Comfort* was smuggled from the Tower and printed separately in 1553, and all the Tower Works were included in the 1557 edition of More’s English writings, including an English translation of *The Sadness of Christ*. The switch from English to Latin in this, More’s final work, suggests an intent to appeal to a broader audience as the Reformation became established across Europe. William Rastell, More’s nephew and editor of the 1557 *English Works*, thought *The Sadness of Christ* merely a continuation of the *Treatise on the Passion* and the *Treatise on the Blessed Body*. This is clearly to misapprehend the context of its composition and its shift in focus from the Eucharist to Christ’s own struggle to accept martyrdom. Many additional factors argue against Rastell’s claim: the difference in language, the genre of *vitae Christi*, and More’s models (both Gerson’s *Monotessaron* and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* attributed to Bonaventure), but most importantly, the depth of identification with the suffering Christ in his struggle to accept the will of God. *The Sadness of Christ* is, in the final analysis, More’s record (for himself and for those who follow) of his assent to martyrdom and a witness to the transformation achieved by faith.

Yet Rastell’s conjecture must not be dismissed, particularly in light of the continuation of the Eucharistic theme found in both works. In his *Confutation*

of Tyndale's *Answer*, More had recommended the Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, most probably in the English adaptation by Nicholas Love known as *The Mirrour of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.⁹ Importantly, most surviving manuscripts of Love's fifteenth-century work carried a short appendix: "A Treatise on the Sacrament," which argues forcefully against the Lollard denial of the Real Presence. And Love's adaptation of it had been approved in 1410 by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, as especially valuable against the sacramentarian heresy. Doubtless it was for this reason that More recommended it, after over a century, to the readers of his controversial work against Tyndale. If More's *Treatise on the Blessed Body* is appended to *The Sadness of Christ*, we have a work similar to Love's *Mirrour*: a meditation on the Scriptural account of Jesus's life, and a treatment of the Catholic understanding of Christ's enduring presence among Christians in the sacrament. So Rastell's conjecture—perhaps heard from More himself—is misleading only if we imagine the two works as continuous rather than companions.

Relative to *The Dialogue of Comfort*, we do not know exactly when *The Sadness of Christ* was begun. It seems likely that it was composed afterwards, as More's circumstances in the Tower grew increasingly more difficult and the probability of martyrdom loomed larger. Any hopes More might have entertained, about being able to live out his remaining days there under life imprisonment, faded once Cromwell's threats of physical violence spoke more darkly of the king's growing impatience with More's "obstinate" silence.¹⁰ Perhaps in response to the changing circumstances of his imprisonment, More began to investigate the very real prospect of martyrdom rather than mere persecution. Significantly, after over 300 pages in the Yale edition, the *Dialogue of Comfort* closes with a chapter entitled "The consideration of the paynefull deth of Chryst, is sufficient to make vs content to suffer paynefull deth for his sake." The *Sadness of Christ* addresses directly the terrors of martyrdom in a way only hinted at in the other Tower works, which either avoid altogether the reality of torture (as in *The Blessed Body*) or treat religious persecution as a culmination of the ordinary woes we are subject to in this life, as in *The Dialogue of Comfort in Tribulation*. More's letters, however, from this time speak of his intent to conform to Christ's suffering wherever it might lead: "my whole study," he wrote to his daughter Margaret in early 1535, "should be upon the passion of Christ and my own passage out of this world...with little regard of my body."¹¹ By this time he could have finished *The Dialogue of Comfort*, whose conceit—an advancing army of Turks threatening all Christians with death or apostasy—presents martyrdom only after it discusses all lesser forms of religious persecution in sometimes

amusing detail, enlivened with More's trademark witty tales, even jokes about beheadings. The polished literary qualities, which lend the book much of its delight, would render it likewise less persuasive as a direct appeal to accept the very real situation More himself then faced: no advancing Turkish army, no chatty nephew to entertain, no witty tales, but instead a gruesome death of hanging, drawing, and quartering. *The Dialogue of Comfort* skips forward to the Crucifixion, but More needed first to explore how Jesus got there. For this, he turned to Gethsemane.

There is no doubt that More's statements prior to his imprisonment suggest a growing confidence that his case of conscience presented him with a clear choice: fidelity or apostasy. Once imprisoned, he reiterated his belief that martyrs faced a God-given situation: "if anyone is brought to the point where he must either suffer torment or deny God, he need not doubt that it was God's will for him to be brought to this crisis. Therefore, he has very good reason to hope for the best" (CW 14, 69). Yet this confidence, that God had somehow brought him to this position, by itself offered little encouragement to bear the physical trials that lay ahead. Largely intellectual, such confidence did not obliterate fear in and of itself. What More needed to find (both for his own immediate needs, certainly, but also for those who might face similar straits), and what he did not fully explore in *The Dialogue of Comfort* was a rhetoric of assent that acknowledged the overwhelming horror of a torturous death even as it offered a convincing rationale for undergoing it. More's solution is as elegant as it is unique among early-modern authors.

Meditation on the Scriptural account of Christ's own suffering drew More to ask what was the meaning of the agony of the garden since Christ took such pains to leave us a record of it. Historically, traditional treatment of that suffering followed two distinct and contesting schools which can be summed up as follows: in the fifth century, St. Jerome and Leo I offered the initial position, arguing that because Christ was God, his "sorrow" (Mt. 26:38) was not of a personal nature; rather, it was over the coming destruction of Jerusalem—that is, it was the result of his perfect love of others and not his sorrow over his own situation. Other Fathers viewed it differently: Cyril of Alexandria, for one, felt that it was inconsistent with the assertion of Christ's full humanity to deny that he felt sorrow or fear for himself. So his agony in the garden was perfectly explicable in human terms, and fully compatible with the teaching of Christ's two natures. Christ's suffering was less paradoxical for More's contemporaries. By then, Christ's agony prior to his crucifixion had received thorough if varied treatment, and the general drift towards accepting a humanly suffering Jesus was routine. Somewhat surpris-

ingly, both Protestants and Catholics aligned themselves with a more literal view of Scripture, which took Jesus' words at face value without imposing a preconceived metaphysic on the event.¹² Tyndale's gloss on Mt. 26 and parallel verses in Luke and Mark comments on Jesus's pained prayer as "he armeth himself against the passion."¹³ Catholic works such as Whytford's *A dayly exercyse and experyence of dethe* (ca. 1517, printed 1537) accepted the literal truth of the gospel accounts, and attributed Christ's agony in the Garden to "the fraylte of our nature in his carnall flesshely parte for the paynes that he knewe wel shulde precede/ and go before dethe."¹⁴ Post-Reformation Evangelicals, such as the Calvinist preacher Daniel Heinsius, continued to see in Christ's genuine agony an exhortation for us to undergo the daily trials necessary to build up the godly kingdom—that is, a reversion to the theme of the *imitatio Christi* popular in the fifteenth century.¹⁵ But the appeal to a voluntary asceticism, even a routine of self-denial, would be insufficient to arm one against martyrdom.

More had seen the old debate play out in 1499 between his friends Erasmus (not yet famous) and John Colet, soon to become Dean of St. Paul's in London. For largely philosophical reasons, Colet sided with Jerome and the impassionist theology, while Erasmus, in *A Short Debate*, argued the more modern line. In the Pseudo-Bonaventure text, and in the expanded version of Nicholas Love, Jesus is clearly undergoing a very human agony in the struggle in Gesthemane quite unlike any he had undergone before. A shift had taken place in devotional use of this prologue to Calvary, and it shows up in the way readers were instructed to understand Jesus' prayers. "Now the Lord Jesus prayed..." the author John of Caulibus writes, taking up the scene of Jesus in Gesthemane, "however he is praying for himself. Commiserate with him and admire his most profound humility. Although he is God, coeternal and coequal with the Father, he seems to have forgotten that he is God and prays like a man... he was willing to carry out this mission, but did not wish to die doing it...."¹⁶ And further, "Therefore, because he was truly human, it was *as a man* that he was placed in great agony."¹⁷ Erasmus's view, while admitting the human scope of the agony, was more pointedly soteriological: if Christ conquered his fear of death as God, it profits us nothing, since we are not God. But if he conquered his fear as man, then we mere men might conquer with him. In addition, Christ's example provides a model for others, since he "conquered fear by yielding to it, deliberately and willingly, for love of us."¹⁸ The objection that Christ himself could scarcely be more fearful than those ancient martyrs who seemed to rejoice in their martyrdom is turned aside here by Erasmus's suggestion that "the Lord became deeply distressed so that his servants would be less distressed. Perhaps it was because he does

not expect us to go against nature and show eager joy amid great torments that he did not choose to exhibit it in himself.”¹⁹ More will take up this notion and develop it to greater effect.

Erasmus’s debate with Colet, while ostentatiously learned, is in essence an exercise in theological forensics and lacks the authenticity and immediacy one picks up immediately from More’s treatment of the same subject. Basing himself on the acknowledged humanity of Jesus, Erasmus relies heavily on an appeal to the *consensus fidelium* (which “chimes sweetly with reason and leaves nature unscathed”²⁰) long abandoned by the schools of metaphysical speculation favoured by Colet. Erasmus suggests he has avoided scholastic methods of argumentation that seem “precise and practical... to its devotees but to you [i.e. Colet] niggling, nit-picking, threadbare, and thoroughly sophistical.”²¹ Even so, his treatise can hardly be seen as contributing much to a debate already decided by such writers of devotional tracts as Love, à Kempis, and Caulibus. That such debates still exercised men like Colet—whose zeal for speculative Christian hermeticism can be seen in an abiding interest in Pseudo-Dionysius and Scriptural arcana—discloses one extreme of sixteenth-century Biblical theology: at the other end we find an acceptance of the contextual over the speculative and a devotional hermeneutic that appeals to the will as well as to the intellect.

Caulibus’s *Meditations* was the most popular but hardly the sole member of this growing genre of works whose use of Scripture avoided the aridity of Christian hermeticism. Scripture read in this more Patristic mode provides food for the faithful, not metaphysical certainties. In *The Sadness of Christ*, More applied the fruits of this mode of devotional writing to the most extreme case. In effect, he asked the question: “Can meditation on the sufferings of Christ prior to his martyrdom offer a sufficient rhetoric of assent to those facing similar trials?”

Texts such as Love’s *Mirroure* recommended meditation on Christ’s wounds (i.e. his crucifixion) for those facing the pain of martyrdom: “For what tyme *the* Martire stant with alle *the* body to rent, and neuer *the* lesse he is ioiful & glad in alle his peyne, where trowest is *than* his soule & his herte? Sothely in *the* wondes of Jesu, yea *the* wondes not closed, bot opun & wide to entre inne, & elles he shuld fele *the* harde yryn, & not mowe bere *the* peyne & *the* sorow, bot sone faile & denye god.”²² More himself suggests that meditation on Christ’s passion would ease the pain of martyrdom in his *Dialogue of Comfort*. By contrast, the agony in the garden, which occupies but a small chapter in most popular treatments of the life of Christ, had seldom served as a focus for meditation on the nature of voluntary acceptance of suffering. More selected it for his *lectio* because it truly captures the essence of the struggle:

the persuasion of the will. So important was this scene in Gethsemane for the persecuted Church that Christ himself, More argues, took unprecedented steps to describe his struggle to the disciples. Because they are famously known to have slept through the event, they could have had no knowledge of what transpired. And yet somehow the event is recorded in Scripture. More muses: "I find it hard to recall any of His other deeds which He took such particular pains to preserve in the memories of men. To be sure, *He told* His apostles about His intense sadness, so that they might be able to hand it down from Him to posterity."²³ For both chronological and theological reasons, More suggests this was a post-Resurrection revelation: "[A]fter He rose from the dead and there could no longer be any doubt that He was God, His most loving mother and beloved disciples hear from His own most holy lips this detailed account, point by point, of His human suffering, the knowledge of which would benefit them (and through them) and others who would come after them, and which no one could have recounted except Christ Himself" (CW 14, 191–193). This direct account of his own struggle has been vouchsafed from the risen Christ for the benefit of those who would follow him. It comes, as it were, directly from Jesus to the reluctant martyr.

In the first part of *The Sadness of Christ*, More presents an initial exploration of Christ's agony from three linked perspectives. The first is doctrinal: Christ draws attention to his extreme suffering to demonstrate his dual nature against those who "went so far wrong as to deny altogether that He was truly a man. These people too, growing from their original founder into a sect, did not hesitate to rend the holy unity of the Catholic Church and to tear it apart..." (CW 14, 93). The second is hortatory: "in order to bind us to Him all the more by reason of His greater sufferings for us, partly in order to admonish us how wrong it is for us either to *refuse* to suffer grief for His sake... or to tolerate grudgingly the punishment due to our sins..." (CW 14, 95–96. Emphasis added). This is the classic late-medieval use of the *imitatio Christi*, where the meditation on Christ's pains—most particularly those suffered on the Cross—is designed to stir affective piety with a view towards enhanced Christian virtue. But the third reason for Christ's suffering is specifically directed toward terrified martyrs:

He foresaw that there would be people of various temperaments in the church (which is His own mystical body)—that His members (I say) would differ considerably in their makeup. And although nature alone, without the help of grace, is quite incapable of enduring martyrdom ... He chose to enhearten [the timorous martyrs] by the example of His own sorrow, His own sadness, His own weariness and unequalled fear, lest they should be so disheartened as they compare their own fearful state of mind with the bold-

ness of the bravest martyrs that they would yield freely what they fear will be won from them by force. (*CW 14*, 97–101)

It is to this last reason, the heartening of the fearful martyr, that More devotes the main body of his treatise.

In opening the subject of the relation of nature and grace—seen here in the reluctance of the timorous martyr and the assistance of grace bestowed once the assent to suffer is achieved (by whatever means, and More will not pause long here to ascertain just how this dynamic is explained by the metaphysicians)—More risked sliding into one of the most divisive controversies of the period: does nature co-operate with grace, or is it superseded by it? With over a decade of polemic under his belt on this question, which surfaced in the Catholic affirmation—and Protestant denial—of the efficacy of works, More had explicit views on the subject: we must do what is in us and God will supply the lack. In the Tower facing martyrdom himself, More must have felt for the first time the gulf between what we are capable of and what seems to be demanded and yet he will not be drawn. Nature, he asserts, is both aided and superseded by grace: “God does not impart grace to men in such a way as to suspend for the moment the function and duties of nature, but instead He either allows nature to accommodate itself to the grace which is superadded to it [as in the case of joyful martyrs]” or one’s nature, if it resists as More’s did, is “overcome and put down by grace” which “may add to the merit of the deed because it was difficult to do” (*CW 14*, 99). Thus he deftly sidesteps—at the height of the Reformation—the defining debate over both the role of the will in the economy of salvation and the agency of grace in assisting or obliterating our reluctance to participate in that economy. Yet his entire thrust suggests that martyrs face a choice, and their decision is free. We can consent, or refuse to consent out of fear.

Having established that the martyr, timorous or not, faces a God-given situation, More explores the reasonableness of fear, asserting that this very fear or torment “carries no stigma of guilt, but rather is an affliction of the sort Christ came to suffer, not to escape” (*CW 14*, 83). And while fear is natural in such situations, Christ’s great charity to us in undergoing it willingly instructs martyrs that their situation too is voluntary: “the reasoning power of His soul, in obedience to the will of the Father, agrees to suffer that most bitter death while at the same time, as proof of His humanity, His bodily senses react to the prospect with revulsion and dread” (*CW 14*, 219–21). Fear, in this case, should not be seen as evidence of weakness or unworthiness. Christ’s agony, More argues, is a “marvelous example of profound anguish as a consolation to those who would be so fearful and alarmed at the thought of torture that

they might otherwise *interpret their fear as a sign of their downfall* and thus yield to despair” (CW 14, 237; emphasis added). The ever-popular stories of eager martyrs can actually impede faith, More seems to say—for some might see their own trepidation as proof of abandonment when the long-expected confidence and indifference to suffering does *not* come.

That eventual strength does come, as promised, is seen in the events which follow Christ's agony when “His spirits were so restored that He arose, returned to His apostles, and freely went out to meet the traitor and the tormentors who were seeking Him to make Him suffer” (CW 14, 257). And tellingly More here adds an unusually personal note: after entering into his glory, Christ prepared “a place also for *those of us* who follow in His footsteps” (CW 14, 257; emphasis added). More contrasts the prone, anguished Christ at prayer with the later confident Christ striding out to meet his accusers—no longer fearful, no longer timorous. The Christ who emerges from his struggle is once again able to astonish, to perform miracles of healing, to throw down an armed cohort with a single phrase. The transformation is also a promise: “Hither, hither let all hasten who are faint of heart. Here let them take firm hold of an unwavering hope when they feel themselves struck by a horror of death. For just as they share Christ's agony, His fear... (provided that they pray and persist in prayer, and submit themselves wholeheartedly to the will of God), they will also share this consolation” (CW 14, 415). Real struggle, real consolation. Significantly, Christ eschews supernatural assistance offered by the ministering angels (prayer alone, and the kenosis of his acceptance of God's will)—a point which More drives home in his discussion of Christ's confrontation with the cohort. We are back to Erasmus's view that if Christ conquers as man, we conquer in him. It is only by fully identifying with the anguished Jesus—and More points out that this is achieved through persistent prayer which generates trust in the goodness of God—that the martyr can expect to endure his ordeal.

Each of the tropes in the Gospel accounts ushers in a discussion that urges the would-be martyr to accept his situation rather than yield to the fear he so naturally faces. In over a dozen places, More has Jesus himself address the reader in speeches ranging from a few lines to nearly a hundred. While this technique is also found in More's sources, he takes it to new lengths. Most tellingly, Jesus's words consistently emphasize the choice between accepting God's will or turning one's back (either through sleep, like the disciples, or denial, like Judas). In one of the most successful speeches, Jesus speaks to the fearful martyr: “if you do not trust yourself, place your trust in me. See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road. Take hold of the border of my garment and you will feel going out from it a power which

will stay your heart's blood from issuing in vain fears..." (CW 14, 103–105). More's intent, of course, is to assist the martyr to muster at the very least faith sufficient to "take hold" of Christ's promise, without which effort the succour of grace cannot follow. Others expose the hypocrisy of those who steadfastly promised to stand by Jesus only to desert him at the first sign of trouble (CW 14, 331 ff.) or of the necessity for Jesus's martyrdom (and the martyrdoms of his followers) in the working out of God's plan (CW 14 537 ff.). Likewise, on several occasions More himself addresses the reader directly (e.g. "Reader, let us pause...." CW 14, 113) to indulge in gentle criticism of our common failings to accommodate God's will, and throughout he favours the inclusive pronouns of "we" and "us," unlike the often first-person speech of his polemics.

The logic of More's exegesis invites him to look beyond the figure of the suffering Christ to the sleeping disciples, the approaching cohort, the Pharisees and elders, and ultimately to Judas himself. In discussing these, More is able, despite the prying scrutiny of his jailers during his last months in the Tower, to comment on the current religious changes that led to his imprisonment. The recent upheavals in the Church, seen through the prism of Gethsemane, amount to another betrayal of Christ, whose mystical body is the Church. This extends not only to various institutional changes (e.g. the Royal Supremacy and the withdrawal from Roman obedience, which for More had always been the sign of the Church's unity) but also the threat to Christ's sacramental body in the Eucharist, which occupies a parallel narrative in More's treatise. In addition to the focus on the physical sufferings of Jesus as proto-martyr, there is a second focus on the sleeping disciples, the elders of the Jews, and Judas or, in More's world, the bishops, statesmen, and king who either countenance or actively encourage the betrayal of Christ.

More quite palpably laments the drowsiness of the "disciples" as he connects the universal drama of Christ's betrayal with recent English developments. In exploring the degrees of culpability of various actors in this universal drama, he notes that "although this comparison of the sleeping apostles applies very well to those bishops who sleep while virtue and the faith are placed in jeopardy, still it does not apply to all such prelates at all points" (CW 14, 261). While some bishops might "sleep" through sloth or apathy, others are in fact sleeping because "they are numbed and buried in destructive desires; that is, drunk with the new wine of the devil, the flesh, and the world..." (CW 14, 263). Still others sleep out of fear for themselves—a fear perhaps excusable when wakefulness may invite martyrdom. Yet Christ "wished them to come forth if they see that the flock entrusted to them is in danger and to face the danger of their own accord for the good of

their flock" (*CW 14*, 269). Only one of England's bishops—John Fisher of Rochester—had done this, and his execution (unlike More's) was already a foregone conclusion.

Those who apostatize through conformity to the illicit demands of power "do not sleep like Peter, they make his waking denial" (*CW 14*, 273). Still others do not sleep like Peter, nor make his waking denial, but "rather [stay] awake with wicked Judas and like Judas [persecute] Christ" (*CW 14*, 275). Here More explicitly targets the reforming bishops intent on altering the liturgy, who in so doing corrupt and betray both the sacramental body and the mystical body of Christ (the Church): "these people blaspheme...by calling [the Eucharist] not only true but also mere bread and wine. For they altogether deny that the real body of Christ ["corpus Christi"] is contained in the sacrament, though they call it by that name.... [H]ow little difference is there, I ask you, between them and those who took Christ captive that night?" (*CW 14*, 355–57).

Yet even this brief foray into doctrinal disputes is tempered—unusually, for what seems to verge on diatribe—by More's constant urging of repentance, and his notion that the betrayal currently taking place in England is but a timeless version of the original betrayal, which, after all, was consistent with the divine plan, however inscrutably. "Now all these groups which I have enumerated certainly bring to our minds the traitor Judas...*as they renew an action in the past...*" (*CW 14*, 395; emphasis added). More's gloss on Christ's words are telling: "But this hour and this power of darkness are not only given to you now against me, but such an hour and such a brief power of darkness will also be given to other governors and other caesars against other disciples of mine.... Through the prince of darkness other caesars and their governors will rise up against other disciples of my flock" (*CW 14*, 545).

The final act, of course, in this universal drama of redemption is already known, and affords both hope and promise. The brief power of those arrayed against Christ is, in this account, limited: not only are the disciples permitted to leave through Christ's command, but the young man taken with them escapes, fleeing naked into the night. Whatever the case, the triumph of those engaged in capturing Jesus is brief. The hour and power of darkness "are not long-lasting and enduring but quite as brief as the present moment to which they are limited, an instant of time always caught between a past that is gone and a future that has not arrived" (*CW 14*, 555–57). The disciples flee, the agony of the garden is finished, and the promised Redemption for Christ's followers is realized.

More's *Sadness of Christ* breaks off exactly at the point where the crowd laid their hands on Jesus—and certainly he would have written further, judg-

ing from the blank gatherings remaining in the manuscript. But his account of the suffering of Christ is essentially complete. His refusal to explain away suffering as somehow unreal or ignoble, or as evidence of abandonment by God, doubtless gains authenticity by his appeal to the reality of fear as the late-medieval interest in Christ's sufferings as a model for Christians to follow is here taken to its ultimate end. It is More's Catholic theology of the Cross with an emphasis on the need to induce the will to accept the burden of discipleship, and the consolation of grace it promises. Armed with sure faith, arrived at solely through meditation on the Word, those who suffer "will feel themselves helped by such consolation as Christ felt; and they will be so refreshed by the spirit of Christ that they will feel their hearts renewed as the old face of the earth is renewed by the dew from heaven, and by means of the wood of Christ's cross let down into the waters of their sorrow, the thought of death, once so bitter, will grow sweet..." (CW 14, 415–17).

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Rogers, *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 509.
2. Thomas More, *De Tristitia Christi*, in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 14/I–II, ed. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 213. Cited hereafter as CW 14.
3. See, for example, Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), pp. 247 ff, 141–46.
4. See, for example, the masterly account of More's ecclesiology, Brian Gogan, *The Common Corps of Christendom* (Leiden: Brill, 1982).
5. Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 106.
6. Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 8, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 505.
7. Thomas More, *Treatise on the Passion; Treatise to Receive the Blessed Body; Instructions and Prayers*, in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 13, ed. Garry E. Haupt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 137.
8. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1996), p. 595.
9. Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, p.37. For Nicholas Love's work, see *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. M. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004). Love's work was printed at least nine times in More's England, and survives in many manuscripts. For the Latin original, see John of Caulibus, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, ed. F. Taney, A. Miller, OSF, and C. Stallings-Taney (Ashville: Pegasus, 2000), and *Meditaciones Vite Christi* (Brepols: Turnholt, 1997; Corpus

Christianorum CLIII). Other useful treatments include Barbara Nolan, "Nicholas Love," *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), pp. 83–96; Patrick O'Connell, "Love's *Mirrou* and the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*," *Analecta Cartusiana* 82 (1980); Jason Reakes, "The Middle English Prose Translation of the *Meditaciones De Passione Christi* and its links with manuscripts of Love's *Mirrou*," *Notes and Queries* 27 (1980), pp. 199–202; Michael Sargeant, "Transmission by the English Carthusians of some Late-Medieval Spirtual Writings," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976), pp. 225–240; and Sr. M. Jordan Stallings, *Meditaciones de Passione Christi olim Sancto Bonaventurae Attributae* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1965).

10. See particularly More's letters to Meg of 16 January and 2/3 May, 1535, Rogers, *Correspondence*, pp. 549, 552–553.
11. Rogers, *Correspondence*, pp. 552–54.
12. In approaching Jesus's suffering, both Protestants and Catholics "tailored widespread devotional attitudes common across confessional divides." See Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 129.
13. William Tyndale, *Tyndale's New Testament*, ed. David Daniell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press:1989), pp 57, 83, 127. See also James D. Tracy, "Humanists Among the Scholastics: Erasmus, More and Lefevre d'Etaples on the Humanity of Christ," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 5 (1985), pp. 30–51.
14. Richard Whytford, *A Werke for housholders* and *A dayly exercyse and experyence of dethe*, ed. James Hogg, *Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies: Salzburg Studies in English Literature* 89 (1979), p. 68.
15. Deborah K Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 96–97.
16. John of Caulibus, p. 239.
17. John of Caulibus, p. 243. Emphasis added.
18. Desiderius Erasmus, *A Short Debate Concerning the Distress, Alarm, and Sorrow of Jesus*, trans. and annotated by Michael J. Heath, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol. 70 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 61.
19. Erasmus, p. 65.
20. Erasmus, p. 66.
21. Erasmus, p. 66.
22. Love, p. 12.
23. *CW 14*, p. 189.