# Thomas More and the "Prayer for Detachment"

Joseph Koterski, S.J.
*Fordham University*

This paper focuses on a theme of special importance in *The Sadness of Christ*, one of the last writings of Thomas More. While awaiting execution in the Tower of London, he wrote this book as a way to reflect on passages from the Gospel that depict the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. In looking upon Christ as a model for virtue in the face of suffering and persecution, More commented at length on how to treat those who wrong us and how to cultivate a proper sense of detachment. This essay will compare More's advice with that of his contemporary, Ignatius Loyola, with special reference to such passages from the *Spiritual Exercises* as the "First Principle and Foundation" and the "Three Degrees of Humility."
**Keywords: More, Ignatius Loyola, detachment, indifference.**

*Cet article s'intéresse à un thème particulièrement important dans* La tristesse du Christ*, un des derniers écrits de Thomas More. Alors qu'il attendait son exécution à la Tour de Londres, il écrivit ce livre afin de réfléchir sur les passages de l'Evangile qui décrivent l'agonie du Christ dans le jardin de Gethsémani. En prenant le Christ comme modèle de vertu face à la souffrance et à la persécution, More médite longuement sur la façon de traiter ceux qui nous font du mal et sur la manière de cultiver le vrai sens du détachement. Cette étude compare les conseils de More à ceux de son contemporain, Ignace de Loyola, en faisant référence tout particulièrement aux passages des* Exercices

spirituels *tels que le "Premier principe et fondement" et les "Trois degrés de l'humilité".*
***Mots-clés : More, Ignace de Loyola, détachement, indifférence***

Este artículo se centra en un tema de especial importancia en *La tristeza de Cristo*, uno de los últimos escritos de Thomas More. Mientras esperaba su ejecución en la Torre de Londres, el autor escribió esta obra como medio para reflexionar sobre aquellos pasajes del Evangelio en los que se refleja la agonía de Cristo en el Huerto de Getsemaní. Al mirar a Jesús como modelo de virtud ante el sufrimiento y la persecución, More expone cómo ha de tratarse a los que nos hacen mal, y cómo cultivar el necesario desprendimiento. Este ensayo compara los consejos de More con los de su coetáneo, Ignacio de Loyola, prestando especial atención a algunos pasajes de sus *Ejercicios Espirituales*, tales como "Primer principio y fundamento" y "Los tres grados de la humildad".
**Palabras clave: More, Ignacio de Loyola, desprendimiento, indiferencia**

* * *

An important theme that frequently recurs in *The Sadness of Christ*,[1] the last book that St. Thomas More ever wrote, is the need to pray for detachment. At the time of the book's composition, More was awaiting execution in the Tower of London. In it he reflects at length on various passages from the Gospels that depict the agony of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and that led to His passion and death. Throughout the volume he takes our Lord as a model of virtue in the face of suffering and persecution. In the course of his reflections on the events recounted in the Passion, More shows how we need to cultivate the sort of detachment that characterized Christ's conduct toward those who wronged Him.

On the other hand, we find a stronger reliance on the idea of renunciation in "A Meditation on Detachment," written in 1534. Even when deprived of the instruments needed for writing anything at length, More still managed to use some charcoal to scratch out his "Prayer for Detachment" in the margins of his Psalter. His determination in setting down such thoughts in his final days shows how crucial the theme of detachment was to him.

We would do well to consider what "detachment" means for More in *The Sadness of Christ*. The word tends, of course, to suggest resignation and surrender, that is, finding a way no longer to care about things that one previously cared for very much. It could involve lifting one's mind to higher things while bringing oneself to cease caring about earthly affairs. I suspect that this approach is indeed what the term usually means in some streams of the Christian spiritual tradition. By way of example, consider some typical lines from near the beginning of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*:

---

[1] St. Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ* in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol.14, Part I [hereafter *CW* 14], edited and translated by Clarence H. Miller (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1976).

> Have this common proverb often in your mind: The eye is not satisfied or pleased with seeing any material things, nor the ear with hearing. Study, therefore, to withdraw the love of your soul from all things that are visible, and to turn it to things that are invisible. Those who follow their own sensuality hurt their own cause and lose the grace of God.[2]

Here and throughout the *Imitation of Christ*, the prevailing concept of detachment is one of renunciation of worldly things in favor of heavenly things.

This is a valid—in fact, a crucially important—aspect of the idea of detachment in Christian spirituality. But I do not believe that this is quite what More meant by the term. Rather, it seems to me that what he was praying for when he asked God for detachment was something closer to what his contemporary Ignatius of Loyola intended in the *Spiritual Exercises*. It would be too much to claim that any influence one way or the other on this topic, for there is no positive evidence that they ever met or even knew of one another. Interestingly, we do know that Ignatius cherished the generosity shown by the English during what he regarded as one of his more successful begging tours when he was traveling to England after his 1529 matriculation at the University of Paris. By that time he had already completed the basic text of the *Spiritual Exercises*.[3] The record shows that he was not shy about sharing the *Exercises* and the

---

[2] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book I, Chapter 1. A modern version based on the English translation made by Richard Whitford around the year 1530. Edited with an introduction by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. (New York NY: Doubleday, 1955), here at p.32. While a Latinist like More would not have needed Whitford's English version, it is significant that Whitford and More were friends and that More almost certainly knew Whitford's rendition (see Gardiner's "Introduction," p.15).

[3] References to the *Spiritual Exercises* in this paper will be made to the following text: *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago IL: Loyola P, 1951), cited hereafter as *Sp Ex*, followed by the paragraph number.

Rules for the "Discernment of Spirits" that he had developed. There is, however, no specific evidence of a meeting between More and Ignatius, and so that is not the claim that I am making here. My claim, rather, is that it is very clear that in his considerations of notions like detachment and indifference Ignatius meant a freedom from disordered attachments. It is thus a poised readiness to do whatever is needed to honor God's will, whether that means following something one happens to be inclined to anyway or giving up that to which one is inclined. Likewise it is detachment when one is equally ready to deal with that to which one is averse, or (perhaps gratefully) to avoid that to which one happens to be averse. In neither case does it require that we cease to have inclinations and aversions, for in many cases, we could not do so no matter how hard we tried. Rather, on the basis of coming to self-knowledge about what our inclinations and our aversions are and about their relative strength, especially in specific contexts when they are likely to be aroused, we can be liberated from a disordered attachment to these inclinations and aversions. Thus it is a matter of gaining the freedom that comes with self-mastery.

What may prove helpful here is a comparison of the views of More and Ignatius on the topic of detachment. I will begin by a review of some important texts of Ignatius, followed by a discussion of several significant texts from *The Sadness of Christ* and from More's Prayer for Detachment.

## 1 . First Principle and Foundation

The opening gambit of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a consideration of the "First Principle and Foundation" (*Sp Ex* §23). Like the exercises that follow the First Principle and Foundation and that comprise the entire first week of this type of retreat when given

in its full form, this first meditation is designed to help a retreatant become more free of disordered inclinations and aversions that could stand in the way of making a good discernment and a good choice. The other exercises in the first week provide various scenarios (e.g., the fall of the angels, the disobedience of Adam and Eve that caused their expulsion from Paradise, and the case of those who die with only a single unrepented mortal sin upon their conscience) to help enable a person to focus on the hideousness of sin and to gain a vigorous sense of how hateful sin is to God. These exercises involve having the retreatant ask for what Ignatius curiously calls the grace of "shame and confusion." This involves gaining a sense of the hideousness of sin, and a sense of the mercy that, however numerous our sins may be, God has shown in keeping us alive, in comparison to the sufferings of those with far fewer sins than we have. After considering each of the above topics, the retreatant is to ask: "how many have been lost on account of a single mortal sin, and how many times I have deserved eternal damnation, because of the many grievous sins that I have committed?" (*Sp Ex* §48).

But, prior to having a person confront such bracing topics, Ignatius directs the one who is guiding another's prayer through these exercises to consider the "First Principle and Foundation." Often the retreatant will find it a bit dry by virtue of its resemblance to an argument in scholastic logic:

> Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.
>
> The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.
>
> Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.
>
> Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are

> concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things.
>
> Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created. (*Sp Ex* §23).

It is important for the retreatant first to spend some time meditating on why we have been created (to praise, reverence, and serve God, and thereby to save our souls). After allowing this point to settle in and to correct any agnosticism about the question of whether there is a set purpose for our lives that follows from the fact that we are God's creatures and not merely the fortuitous results of chance, those undertaking this meditation should consider its implication for their choices. Every other type of creature could conceivably prove to be of assistance in attaining our God-given end, and so there will be reason to use them in so far as they help and to be detached from them insofar as they hinder the attainment of that end.

In considering this line of reasoning the person doing this exercise meets a portion of the text that involves the notion of detachment: "he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him." However easy it may be to say such words, it is often much harder to live that way. We have our various inclinations and aversions, our habits and our attachments to various people and objects. Even a young person is likely to have strong desires and feelings, but someone who does not yet have much self-knowledge may not realize just how many they are, nor their strength. The older we get, the more like ourselves we tend to become. It is not that the way in which our characters have been formed automatically determines what we will do in the future, but that our characters do predispose us to act in certain ways. With every choice we become more like the sort of person who made such a choice, and in that sense, more like the person we are already. We retain the power of

free choice, to act otherwise, and even to work at reform in our lives, but it is more difficult as we grow older. Out of this highly realistic sense of the difficulties of really becoming liberated from our attachments Ignatius would have the retreatant move to the next part of this exercise. At its core is the easily misunderstood term "indifference":

> Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things.

Like the word "detachment," the word "indifferent" could upon cursory reading suggest a state in which one does not care one way or the other about something, and to say that we should "make ourselves indifferent" could easily suggest that Ignatius is thinking about detachment in the sense of renunciation. Clearly, there might be choices in which we do not have any strong preference among our options, or perhaps any preference at all: green or blue, apple pie or cherry, sitting at this table or that one. If someone else is inclined to go one way rather than the other, it is easy to yield.

But the examples that Ignatius then provides are not of that sort. Rather, they are examples where virtually everyone will have a decided preference, for objectively sound reasons: health or sickness, riches or poverty, honor or dishonor, a long life or a short one. To be willing to defer to the less desirable option in the case of alternatives like these is normally an acquired taste. We admire the person who will risk sickness in order to care for someone with a contagious disease. We cannot help but praise someone who renounces wealth or even what passes for average well-being in order to live a vow of poverty. We stand in awe of someone whom we find to have quietly endured what seemed withering criticism and even disrespect for

what the person knew to be right. We revere the martyr like More who accepts the verdict of death to give witness to his Lord.

At this point in the *Exercises* Ignatius is not yet asking the retreatant to prefer the harder option as a way to imitate Christ more perfectly. That will come in the exercise called "The Three Degrees of Humility" (*Sp Ex* §165-67). All that is asked in the initial exercise is for those undertaking this meditation is to "make ourselves indifferent" by coming "not to prefer" one to the other. As I often explain when trying to give the *Exercises* to others, I do not believe that Ignatius means here that we are to imagine that we do not have preferences or aversions. Nor does he mean that we should forcibly try to remove our inclinations and our dislikes, whether by psychological conditioning or by mental gymnastics. Rather, I think that he means that we need to become increasingly more free of excessive inclinations and aversions that would prevent us from making the sort of choices that would bring about the end for which we are created. This effort to be free of disordered attachments to certain aversions or certain inclinations could very well require some ascetical practices to prune back a strong feeling or desire, but it does not usually mean the elimination of all inclination or aversion.

If I might resort momentarily to an example from sports, consider a shortstop in a baseball game. Right-handed shortstops might well find it easier to catch balls hit to their left, and thus closer to their gloved hands, but so far as I know, most shortstops would actually prefer that to have to reach across their bodies to their right. They will then find themselves already putting their weight on their right foot for the throw to first base, rather than having to pivot before they throw. (The situation is just the reverse, of course, for a left-handed infielder.) There is no need to remove their inclination to one situation or their disinclination to the other. What is needed for success in playing the position is that they are free from any excessive attachment or aversion. They need to have a poised

readiness to act in relation to where the ball is actually hit. It is shortstops like these who are truly "indifferent." It is not that they do not care, but that they are free. They do what they need to do so as to achieve the end. Something similar is true for ballroom dancing, playing the piano, driving on the expressway, succeeding in business, and even having a good conversation.

Mundane as these examples may be, perhaps they help to bring out the distinctive note in the Ignatian sense of detachment to be found in the meaning of the term "indifference" here in the First Principle and Foundation." The term designates a freedom from excessive inclination or disinclination, a freedom from disproportionate attachment or aversion. This is to be sought in those matters on which "we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition." Sometimes our established commitments require us to a course of action where no such detachment would be appropriate. Even where there is no prohibition that is relevant, there is no denial that we have our inclinations or aversions, but only the cultivation of a real freedom from attachments that can constrict us. The remedy begins with the sort of growth in self-knowledge that makes us aware of what the inclinations and aversions are, not so much to be stripped of them but to become master over them, ready even to sacrifice an inclination or to engage in something to which we are spontaneously averse, if that is what is required for achieving the end for which we have been created.

## 2 . The Meditation on the Three Classes of Men

There are various points within the *Exercises* when Ignatius returns to his signature notion of indifference and detachment, but let us concentrate on one of the more important such texts. The Second Week of the full version of the *Exercises* consists in meditations on

the life of Christ, beginning with the Incarnation and extending throughout the public life. Interspersed with those meditations are various special prayer exercises that Ignatius devised to help dispose retreatants to be more free to discern the will of God for them and to move toward a choice (technically known as an "election") in regard to the question that brought them to make the retreat. In the course of the Second Week, Ignatius proposes an exercise designed specifically to help a person reflect on the need to preserve and enhance the detachment gained in the First Week.

This exercise, called a "Meditation on the Three Classes of Men," is admittedly somewhat complex. He asks the retreatant to imagine three men, each of whom has obtained ten thousand ducats, but not entirely as they should have, that is, for the love of God (*Sp Ex* §150). The precise worth of ten thousand ducats is not relevant here. Suffice it to say that it is a considerable sum of money. What is important is that the purpose of the men in obtaining the money was at odds with what the First Principle and Foundation had identified as the purpose that ought to govern our actions, viz., praising, reverencing, and serving God our Lord and thereby saving our souls. Each of the three men does want to be rid of the burdens that they have come to feel as the result of the discrepancy between the delight of possessing this highly desirable sum of money and the burden of having obtained it for the wrong reason.

With this scenario in mind, the retreatant is directed to ponder the diverse ways in which the three men tackle the problem. The first envisions ridding himself of the felt burden by ridding himself of the money, but somehow he never gets around to doing so. The second does want to rid himself of the felt burden but also wants to retain the sum of money. Thus he wants to resolve the problem by having God come around to his position and somehow make known that he should retain the money. In wanting to be rid of the burden, the third cultivates the sort of detachment at issue earlier in the First

Principle and Foundation, namely, the indifference of neither wanting to retain the sum nor to give it away, unless either course becomes known to be the will of God.

Presumably the lack of real freedom is clear in the case of the person who simply "never gets around to it" and in the case of the person who wants God to come around to his view rather than coming around to God's view. In the case of the third class of men, we will do well to consider the actual text in order to see that this solution is a genuine case of the Ignatian sense of detachment as indifference from any disordered attachment, that is, a poised readiness in freedom to follow an inclination or to surrender it (or, on the other hand, a readiness to avoid that to which one is averse or to be willing to deal with it):

> These want to rid themselves of the attachment, but they wish to do so in such a way that they desire neither to retain nor to relinquish the sum acquired. They seek only to will and not will as God our Lord inspires them, and as seems better for the service and praise of the Divine Majesty. Meanwhile, they will strive to conduct themselves as if every attachment to it had been broken. They will make efforts neither to want that, nor anything else, unless the service of God our Lord alone move them to do so. As a result, the desire to be better able to serve God our Lord will be the cause of their accepting anything or relinquishing it. (*Sp Ex* §155)

From this text it seems clear that the Ignatian idea of indifference presumes that we would give up anything that is sinful in principle, but it does not require such complete repudiation of a desire or feeling that is legitimate in principle. Detachment does not reside simply in renouncing one's inclinations or aversions, but in coming to a mastery of them, so that one is free with regard to them rather than enslaved to them. As in the First Principle and Foundation, this text from the second week presents an asceticism of indifference or detachment that is distinctively different from the

ascetical tradition that recommends the *prima facie* renunciation of one's inclinations or the presumption that we should choose in favor of our aversions as the preferred option because of its penitential character.

## 3 . The Idea of Detachment in More's *The Sadness of Christ*

It is my contention that we have here in More's text something decidedly akin to what we find in those of Ignatius. It is not that some of the more common senses of indifference (e.g., not caring about something or, more ascetically, complete renunciation) are entirely absent. In fact, on the very first page of *The Sadness of Christ*, when commenting on the hymn that Jesus and his disciples recited before they went out to the Mount of Olives, More launches into a criticism of the sort of table talk that is "meaningless and inconsequential"[4] (if not actually vicious) and that is followed by our leaving the table "without giving thanks to God and with never a thought for the gratitude we owe Him." In the practice that More lambasts here we have a sense of being carelessly indifferent to something that ought to matter to us, and More's judgment is clearly that taking an "I don't care attitude" in this context is blameworthy.

There are also passages in which we do see indifference in the sense of cultivated renunciation, that is, a deliberate asceticism in which we must steel ourselves to withstand certain pains. For example, More sees in the figure of Christ just this type of renunciation throughout the episode when Christ asks the crowd "Whom do you seek?" and confronts the mass of armed men in the certain prospect of torture and death ahead (*CW* 14, 417/11– 419/8).

---

4 *CW* 14, 3/10.

But it seems to me that it is precisely the sense of detachment as indifference that is the sense crucial to the episode that is at the center More's concern in this volume. As the full title—*The Sadness, the Weariness, the Fear, and the Prayer of Christ before He Was Taken Prisoner*—suggests, More's main concern in this book is to reflect on the human reaction of Christ to his approaching suffering and death by considering his various feelings and emotions—as well as the nature of his prayer—during the time spent in the Garden of Olives, from the end of the Last Supper until the arrest. The book is organized as a kind of commentary on quotations drawn from the treatment of these events as found in all four of the Gospels and set out in chronological order. In the course of his remarks on these events, More raises and answers various questions of interpretation about the texts. He also draws out various lessons for how Christians should conduct themselves under persecution, and he uses some of the texts as a basis for passing judgment on various current events and certain practices typical of his times.

The work is thus a commentary, but also more than a commentary. Completed in 1535 while More was in the Tower, the book features an unusual choice by More, coverage of the period just before Christ's arrest. It has an interesting correspondence to the time prior to More's own arrest. Throughout his life More was intensely concerned to model his own life after that of Christ, and so we can well concede that this book shows us More reflecting on how he had needed to conduct himself in the time leading up to his own arrest.

In a similar fashion, to prepare himself for the sort of dilemmas that he could presume that he would encounter when working at the highest level of English politics, More wrote the *Utopia* in 1515-1516, just two years before formally joining Henry's service. The likelihood that the characters Morus and Hythloday represent two sides of his mind seems to me considerable, especially

on the basis of their sparring in the first book about whether Hythloday ought to offer himself to advise the King about what he had seen on his visit to the island of Utopia. The merits of that interpretation only increase by considering the rather obvious ironies of the second book, in which we see displayed the consequences of systematically denying the fundamental principles of an Augustinian vision of statesmanship. Given the fact that More lectured on Augustine's *De civitate dei* in 1501 and the care that More took to observe these principles in his own tenure of governance, it seems likely that the pages of the *Utopia* gave More the platform for working out in advance the consequences of failing to respect these principles. Just as More resorted to writing a book in order to prepare for entering Henry's service, he also took up his pen to prepare to meet his Maker.

By making careful use of various learned authors, including Paul of St. Mary, the Archbishop of Burgos (e.g., *CW* 14, 3), and Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris (e.g., *CW* 14, 313/8; 621/9), More introduces a discussion of various theological and textual queries. He speculates on just what the hymn was that Christ and his disciplines sang after supper, on who the young man was who left his garment in the grip of the soldiers and ran off naked, and on whether Christ should be understood as speaking seriously or ironically when he tells his sleeping disciples to take their rest so soon after urging them to rise and pray against temptation. This last topic provides an occasion for More to speculate on whether those bishops who fail to defend their flocks are a contemporary equivalent to the slumbering disciples.

But by far the most pressing theological concern in the first half of his book is to resolve the apparent contradiction between holding that Christ is truly divine and accepting the reports of Christ being sad, weary, and fearful (as noted in the volume's title). It is in the resolution of this paradox that we find More relying on a notion

of indifference and detachment that is parallel to the one discussed above in reference to Ignatius. As indicated above, I do not wish to make any claim of influence by the one on the other, but only to note that it is much the same sense of detachment that Ignatius recommends in his *Exercises* that also permits More to resolve the paradox and to work out a way in which to endure some of the pressures of his own persecution on the model of Christ.

If the mention of sadness, weariness, and fear are genuine psychological states in Christ (*CW* 14, 49/6-8), would they not prevent us from asserting his divinity? More then examines the worry that the divinity of Christ would rule out the very possibility of him really being sad, weary, or fearful. Are the references to these states simply for the sake of appearances? More shows himself alert to various ways in which one could go wrong in interpreting these scriptural texts. As we might well expect, he is intent on holding the traditional Catholic position in Christology, that Christ is true God and true man.

More's concern is not only with maintaining orthodoxy on the question of Christ's divinity but also with affirming his real humanity: "Since He was no less really a man than He was really God, I see no reason for us to be surprised that, insofar as He was man, He had the ordinary feelings of mankind (though certainly no blameworthy ones)—no more than we should be surprised that, insofar as He was God, He performed stupendous miracles" (*CW* 14, 51/2-7). More's concern in this portion of the text also extends to the question of whether Christ might be giving us examples for imitation. It is here, I believe, that we find something like Ignatius's distinctive sense of detachment.

More has an imagined interlocutor voice the problem: "I am no longer surprised at His capacity for these emotions, but I cannot help being surprised at His desire to experience them. For He taught His disciples not to be afraid of those who can kill the body only and

can do nothing beyond that; and how can it be fitting that He Himself should now be very much afraid of those same persons, especially since even His body could suffer nothing from them except what He Himself allowed?" (*CW* 14, 53/5-10). Why would the proto-type of martyrs be terrified at the approach of pain? Shouldn't He have set a good example in the matter by suffering death without fear or hesitation rather than being downcast?

The lesson that More draws from the successfully resolved paradox is not that Jesus cultivated a Stoic sort of position, by steeling himself to indifference to the pain or a mind-over-matter resilience against weariness or a heroic refusal to allow such emotions as sadness or fear any sway in his consciousness. Quite the opposite. What he finds in the example of Christ is the sort of indifference that we described above: a poised readiness to do what is needed for the task assigned by his Father, despite the aversion. He finds, for instance, in Christ's prayer to the Father in the garden that the cup of suffering may pass, but that His Father's will not His own) be done, a ready acknowledgment of the fear at the same time as a willingness to embrace the coming pain.

There are similar passages throughout the *Sadness of Christ* that make the application of this view of Christ's indifference to the situations in which his followers find themselves. In commenting, for instance, on Christ's command that his disciples not fear death, More writes:

> Those who bring up these objections and others of the same sort do not scrutinize carefully enough all the facets of this problem and do not pay enough attention to what Christ meant when He forbad His followers to fear death. For He hardly intended it to mean that they would never under any circumstances recoil from a violent death, but rather that they should not, out of fear, flee from a death that will not last, only to run, by denying the faith, into one which will be everlasting. For He wishes His followers to be brave and

> prudent soldiers, not senseless and foolish. (*CW* 14, 57/5–59/4).

Shortly after that passage More compares the advice that Christ gives his followers (and through them subsequent generations of martyrs) to the advice given by a doctor to a sick man, for the doctor will not try to persuade the afflicted individual not to feel any mental anguish at the thought of the pain incurred by a forthcoming medical procedure, but to bear up under the pain by considering how it will be outweighed by the pleasures of health and the avoidance of worse pain in the future (*CW* 14, 61/1-10). For More there is no guilt appropriate to those who hesitated to expose themselves to death for Christ, and yet were willing to do so if needed:

> Before the actual engagement, fear is not reprehensible, as long as reason does not cease to struggle against fear—a struggle which is not criminal or sinful but rather an immense opportunity for merit. For do you imagine that, since those most holy martyrs shed their blood for the faith, they had no fear at all of death and torments. On this point I will not pause to draw up a list; to me Paul may stand for a thousand of them. (*CW* 14, 73/1-7).

After drawing out the same point by a comparison with the emotions common to soldiers who carry out their orders in the face of danger, More once again uses the notion of detachment as a cultivated freedom from disordered feelings when he summarizes his explanation of Christ's emotions in this way:

> As for our Savior Christ, what happened a little later shows how far He was from letting His sadness, fear, and weariness prevent Him from obeying His Father's command and keep Him from carrying out with courage all those things which He had formerly regarded with a wise and wholesome fear. For the time being, however, He had more than one reason why He should choose to suffer fear, sadness, weariness, and grief—"choose" I say, not "be forced," for who could have

> forced God? Quite the contrary, it was by His own marvelous arrangement that His divinity moderated its influence on His humanity for such a time and in such a way that He was able to yield to the passions of our frail humanity and to suffer them with such terrible intensity." (*CW* 14, 85/7– 89/3)

More then lists what he takes to be the Lord's main reasons: to bear witness to the truth about being divine as well as human, to bind us to Himself all the more by sharing our sadness, fear, and weariness, as well as to encourage those of faint heart. The last point seems worth quoting directly:

> Finally, since nothing was hidden from His eternal foreknowledge, 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 (since, as the apostle says, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Spirit"), nevertheless God does not impart grace to men in such a way as to suspend for the moment the functions and duties of nature, but instead He either allows nature to accommodate itself to the grace which is superadded to it, so that the good deed may be performed with all the more ease, or else, if nature is disposed to resist, so that this very resistance, overcome and put down by grace, may add to the merit of the deed because it was difficult to do. Therefore, since He foresaw that there would be many people of such a delicate constitution that they would be convulsed with terror at any danger of being tortured, He chose to enhearten them 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 boldness of the bravest martyrs that they would yield freely what they fear will be won from them by force. (*CW* 14, 97/ 8–101/ 8).

This lengthy text not only recommends the cultivation of a poised readiness to do that to which one is much averse, but it also

uses this notion of detachment to explain the choices made by Christ himself. To make the point as clear as he can, More imagines at some length the encouragement that Christ wanted his actions to provide (see *CW* 14, 101/10–107/8).

Toward the end of the book More again makes use of the notion of detachment as freedom for disordered affections when he offers counsel about the lesson to learn from the flight of the apostles after Christ's arrest:

> But if someone should happen to find himself in a situation where he recognizes an imminent danger that he will be driven by force to offend God, he ought to do what the apostles did—avoid capture by fleeing. I do not say this to suggest that the apostles' flight was praiseworthy, on the grounds that Christ, in His mercy (though He is indeed merciful) had permitted them to do so because of their weakness. Far from praising it, He had foretold it that very night as occasion of sin for them. But if we feel that our character is not strong enough, let us all imitate this flight of theirs insofar as we can, without sinning, flee the danger of falling into sin. (*CW* 14, 589/8–591/7).

Using this episode in relation to various comparisons from ordinary life, More employs to the end of the book the same notion of detachment that has been our concern in this essay.

## 4 . "A Meditation on Detachment"

For More, there comes a time when one's cultivation of a proper detachment does require the complete renunciation of the goods of this world. It seems to me that this is the sense of detachment that is primary in his 1534 meditation on the subject. Unceasingly, line after line, it is a prayer for the kind of resolve that is championed by the tradition of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of*

*Christ* and of Ignatius's "Three Degrees of Humility." The text largely speaks for itself:

> Give me thy grace, good Lord,
> To set the world at nought;
>
> To set my mind fast upon you,
> And not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths;
>
> To be content to be solitary,
> Not to long for worldly company;
>
> Little by little utterly to cast off the world,
> And rid my mind of all the business thereof;
>
> Not to long to hear of any worldly things,
> But that the hearing of worldly phantasies may be to me unpleasant;
>
> Gladly to be thinking of God,
> Piteously to call for His help;
>
> To lean unto the comfort of God,
> Busily to labor to love Him;
> To know my own vileness and wretchedness,
> To humble and meeken myself under the mighty hand of God;
>
> To bewail my sins passed;
> For the purging of them, patiently to suffer adversity;
>
> Gladly to bear my purgatory here;
> To be joyful of tribulations;
>
> To walk the narrow way that leads to life,
> To bear the cross with Christ;
>
> To have the last thing in remembrance,
> To have ever before my eye my death that is ever at hand;
>
> To make death no stranger to me,
> To foresee and consider the everlasting fire of hell;
>
> To pray for pardon before the judge come,
> To have continually in my mind the passion that Christ suffered for me;

For His benefits unceasingly to give Him thanks,
To buy the time again that I before have lost;

To abstain from vain conservations,
To eschew light foolish mirth and gladness;

Recreations not necessary – to cut off;
Of worldly substance, friends, liberty, life and all,
to set the loss as nothing for the winning of Christ;

To think my greatest enemies my best friends;
For the brethren of Joseph could never had done Him so much good with their love and favor as they did him with their malice and hatred.

These attitudes are more to be desired of every man than all the treasure of all the princes and kings, Christian and heathen, were it gathered and laid together all upon one heap.[5]

Joseph Koterski, s.j.
koterski@fordham.edu

[5] Thomas More, "A Meditation on Detachment" in Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ, and Final Prayers and Instructions*, edited with an Introduction by Gerard Wegemer, English translation by Clarence Miller (Princeton NJ: Scepter, 1993), p.148-50.