THOMAS MORE ON THE SADNESS OF CHRIST:
FROM MYSTAGOGY TO MARTYRDOM

JEFFREY L. MORROW
Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, Seton Hall University

Thomas More presents us with a wonderful example of martyrological exegesis where his exegetical work was intended to inspire his readers to live the virtues, to follow Christ, and to provide consolation amidst tribulation. Such exegesis aimed to aid the reader to live the martyrdom required in ordinary life and beyond that, if necessary, with mental anguish, physical torture, and even death on behalf of Christ. Before examining More’s work, I first situate this discussion within the broader conversation concerning modern biblical interpretation - in particular the notion of senses of Scripture - therein explaining how I shall be using terms like mystagogy and martyrdom in this article. I shall then examine More’s spiritual exegesis of Jesus’ passion narratives, paying particular attention to the agony in the garden. I shall conclude with a look at the saint’s life, which provides a background for his interpretation of Scripture.

I

In 1988 then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered his famous Erasmus Lecture ‘Biblical Interpretation in Conflict.’¹ He pointed out the limitations as well as the dangers of contemporary biblical interpretation. He called for a ‘criticism of criticism’ wherein historical criticism would apply its methods to itself, examining its presuppositions in order to take better cognizance of its limits.² In the conversation that ensued Ratzinger spoke of the need for a biblical hermeneutic that would unite the best of traditional Catholic exegesis, exemplified by the church fathers, with the best contemporary historical exegesis.³

More recently an urgent need for a liturgical or sacramental hermeneutic has been voiced. The Bible began as liturgy; before the Bible was a book, the texts of Scripture were proclaimed in liturgical celebrations centered on the Sacraments. Moreover, the Sacraments are the place where the truth of Scripture becomes actualized, where we encounter salvation history and are taken up into its living currents. Indeed, the documents that became Scripture were canonized because of their use in the Church’s liturgy; their centrality in the liturgies of the churches founded by the apostles was the primary criterion the Church used in deciding upon their canonicity.⁴ Beyond that, much of the content of Scripture, the contours of salvation history, has a liturgical or sacramental focus.⁵ Finally, the point of Scripture is our sanctification, our divinization, and thus our future complete participation in the heavenly liturgy of eternity, which we anticipate and participate in at every celebration of the Mass.⁶

Working within a liturgical or sacramental hermeneutic we can follow the church fathers to demonstrate how such exegesis, mystagogical by nature, moves inevitably and necessarily beyond mystagogy towards martyrdom.⁷ This forms a natural link with the traditional