

THOMAS A KEMPIS: *The Imitation of Christ*, Image Books, 1955

Thomas A Kempis was born in Kempen, Prussia in 1379 into a family of artisans and metal workers. At the age of thirteen years, he left his family to join his older brother, John, who had ten or twelve years earlier traveled to Deventer in Holland to join the "Brothers of the Common Life" founded by Gerhard Groote. Young Thomas was welcomed and trained in the "new devotion" for a period of seven years. Although the communities founded by Groote took no formal vows, they lived a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience modeled on the lives of the early Christians of Jerusalem and Antioch in the first century.

During his seven years at Deventer, Thomas a Kempis spent much of his time transcribing manuscripts and treatises of the early church Fathers, particularly those of Bernard of Clairveaux. In addition, he transcribed the entire Bible in four large volumes which still survive.

Late in 1399, he left Deventer to join the Augustinian community at Mount St. Agnes, of which his brother John had become prior. Thomas was formally ordained at the age of 33 years. The next 57 years of his life were spent as scribe, teacher, and contemplative. He died at the age of 91 years in 1471, and was buried in the grounds of the priory at Mount St. Agnes.

"De Imitatione Christi", written when he was in his late thirties, was issued anonymously in 1418 and circulated widely throughout the communities founded by Groote. A further 20 years were to pass before Thomas A Kempis identified himself as author.

In the centuries since, "The Imitation of Christ" has become a source of wisdom and spiritual nourishment for seekers of all traditions. It has been the lifelong companion of many who have sought to perfect their lives in the spirit of the Gospels. The writings of Thomas A Kempis reflect great mystical insight and a deep understanding of human frailty. Both Erasmus of Rotterdam and Paracelsus of Einseideln were profoundly influenced by his work. And both Erasmus and Paracelsus were active in the communities of the "Brothers of the Common Life" during the early Renaissance. Thomas Merton, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, and Josepha Menendez of the Order of the Sacred Heart have all been powerfully influenced by this work

Although written primarily for monastic communities, this enduring and illuminating work remains a source of guidance for all who seek a way through the perplexities and contradictions of an age in which spiritual values have been subverted by materiality, consumerism and the glorification of the ego. This work remains a perennial source of inspiration and wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

Religion, it may be said, was in not too healthy a state [during the 15th century]. Still, as has often happened in the Church of Christ, in the midst of the hurly-burly and the spiritual torpor, God raised up great and noble souls: a St Catherine of Siena in Italy; Henry Suso and Ludolph of Saxony in Germany; Jean Charlier de Gerson in France;

and, in the Low Countries, the followers of the "modern devotion," such as Gerard Groote.

This last group, with which Thomas of Kempen became associated in 1392, did not constitute or join a religious order, but simply determined to live their lives as nearly as possible in imitation of the lives of the early Christians. As the movement grew, many affiliated to it still lived in their own homes, but endeavoured to preserve the spirit; others, especially priests, lived in the community. Their character is perhaps best denoted by the simple name they chose to go under: "The Brothers of the Common Life." Their teachings were called the "modern devotion," by which they wished to be distinguished from those who were delving too much, they thought, into pretentious mysticism. One of their chief aims was not merely to deepen the religious life as a cure for the widespread religious laxity of the times, but also to promote sound learning. By the end of the fifteenth century, schools of the Brotherhood had sprung up all over Germany and the Netherlands, and such a man as Erasmus had come under their influence.

The Brotherhood was not looked on with admiring eyes from all directions. They taught freely, for the love of God; they were not allowed to ask for or receive alms, but worked for their daily bread. Hence, not a few vested interests, religious and civil alike, were quick to dub them dangerous reformers. However, they were approved by the Pope St. Gregory XI in 1376 and gradually grew to enjoy the support of such men as the great Cardinal of Cusa, Nicholas.

In 1384, however, when Gerard Groote lay dying at the early age of forty-four, he felt that his Brotherhood needed a firmer and more stable organization, and so he urged them to adopt the Rule of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. pp 7-8

BOOK 1: ADMONITIONS USEFUL FOR A SPIRITUAL LIFE

He who follows Me, says Christ our Saviour, walks not in darkness, for he will have the light of life. p 31

How great a vanity it also is to desire a long life and to care little for a good life. . .

He who knows himself well is mean and abject in his own sight, and takes no delight in the vain praise of men. . .

The more knowledge you have, the more grievously will you be judged for its misuse, if you do not live according to it. . .

If you would learn anything and know it profitably to the health of your soul, learn to be unknown and be glad to be considered despicable and as nothing. pp 32-33

It is great wisdom, therefore, not to be too hasty in our deeds, not to trust much in our own wits, not readily to believe every tale, not to show straightway to others all that we hear or believe. . .

Always take counsel of a wise man, and desire to be instructed and governed by others rather than to follow your own ingenuity. . .

We ought also to seek in Holy Scripture spiritual profit rather than elegance of style, and to read simple and devout books as gladly as books of high learning and wisdom. Do not let the authority of the author irk you, whether he be of great learning or little, but let the love of every pure truth stir you to read. Ask not: Who said this; but heed well what is said. Men pass lightly away, but the truth of God endures forever.

pp 36-37

Exult not in the strength or fairness of your body, for by a little sickness it may soon be disfigured.

p. 38

There is no man so perfect or so holy in this world that he does not sometimes have temptations, and we cannot be fully without them. Though they be for a time very grievous and painful, yet if they are resisted they are very profitable, for by them a man is made more humble and is purified and instructed in various manners which he would never have known save through the experience of such temptations.

pp 44-45

In judging others a man often labors in vain, often errs, and carelessly offends God, but in judging himself and his own deeds he always labors fruitfully and to his spiritual profit.

p 47

He does his deed well who does it rather for the common good than for his own will.

p 48

If you admonish any person once or twice, and he will not accept it, do not strive too much with him, but commit all to God.

p 49

The time of adversity shows who is of most virtue. Occasions do not make a man frail, but they do show openly what he is . . .

The religious habit and the tonsure help little; the changing of one's life and the mortifying of passions make a person perfectly and truly religious.

p 50

If a good habit is sometimes interrupted for the help of our neighbor, it may soon be taken up again, but if it be interrupted through sloth or negligence, it will hinder us greatly, and will with difficulty be taken up anew. . .

All may not use the same kind of exercise, but one person should use one kind and another person another, as each shall deem most profitable.

p 54

Abandon curiosity and read such matters as shall stir you to compunction of heart for your sins, rather than only to pass the time. If you will withdraw yourself from superfluous words and from unprofitable business, and from hearing rumors and idle tales, you will find convenient time to be occupied in holy meditation.

p 55

It is easier to be always alone at home than to go forth into the world and not offend. No man can safely mingle among people save he who would gladly be solitary if he could. p 56

It is better that a man be solitary and take good heed of himself than that, forgetting himself, he perform miracles in the world. It is also laudable in a religious person seldom to go abroad, seldom to see others, and seldom to be seen of others. p 57

Never desire to be completely at liberty, but hold yourself always under some wholesome discipline. p 58

Fight strongly, therefore, against all sin, and fear not too much even though you are encumbered by a bad habit, for that bad habit can be overcome by a good habit. . . .

A good man always finds matter enough over which he ought rightfully to sorrow, for, if he beholds himself, or if he thinks about his neighbor, he will see no one lives here without great misery. p 59

Two things greatly help a man to amendment of life. They are a strong withdrawal of himself from those things to which his body most impels him, and a fervent labor for the virtues he most needs. p 70

If Jesus Crucified were often in our hearts and in our memory, we should soon be learned in all things that are necessary for us. p 71

BOOK II: ADMONITIONS LEADING TO THE INNER LIFE

No great trust is to be put in a man, who is mortal and frail, though he be greatly profitable to you and much loved, nor is any great grief to be taken if he sometimes turns against you. Those who today may be with you, tomorrow may be against you, they often turn as the wind does. p 76

Do not regard much who is with you or who is against you, but let this be your greatest study: that God may be with you in everything that you do. p 78

First put yourself at peace, and then you may the better make others be at peace. . .

Consider how far you yet are from the perfect humility and charity of Christian people, who cannot be angry with any except themselves. p 79

To live peacefully with evil men and with impertinent men who lack good manners and are illiterate and rub us the wrong way - that is a great grace, and a manly deed, and much to be praised, for it cannot be done save through great spiritual strength. . .

He who is the true conqueror of himself is the true lord of the world, the friend of Christ, and the true inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. p 80

It is not in the power of man to gladly bear the Cross, to love the Cross, to chastise the body and make it submissive to the will of the spirit, to flee honors gladly, to sustain reproofs, to despise himself and to desire to be despised, patiently to suffer adversities with all the displeasures that accompany them, and not to desire any manner of profit in this world. If you trust in yourself, you will never bring all this about. But if you trust in God, he will send you strength from heaven, and the world and the flesh will be made subject to you. p 97

After this bodily death you will still live, and the more you can die to yourself here, the more do you begin to live to God. p 98

BOOK III: THE INWARD SPEAKING OF CHRIST TO A FAITHFUL SOUL

A thing that is of small price is many times busily sought, great contention sometimes rises over a penny, and for the promise of a little worldly gain men do not shrink to labor and sweat both night and day. But alas, for sorrow! For everlasting goods, for the rewards that cannot be rightly valued by man's heart, for the high honor and glory that never shall have an end, men are slow to take any kind of pain or labor. p 106

Because of a little adversity you soon leave off what you had begun in My service, and with great yearning you seek outward consolation. But a strong and faithful lover of God stands unshaken in all adversities, and gives little heed to the deceitful persuasions of the enemy. As I please such a lover in prosperity, so I do not displease him in adversity. A wise lover does not so much consider the gift of his lover as he does the love of the giver. p 112

Strive always like a true knight against all the stirrings of the enemy, and if sometimes through your frailty you are overcome, rise soon again, and take more strength than you had first, and trust truly to have more grace and more comfort from God than you had before. p 114

As far as lies in you, do your best in your accustomed prayers and good deeds, and do not forget your duties, or be negligent because of any dullness or disquiet of mind. . .

Those, too, who are beginners and still lack experience in spiritual toil may easily err and be deceived unless they are ruled by the counsel of others. And if they feel the need to follow their own counsel and in no ways be shaken from it, it will be very dangerous to them in the end. It is not often seen that those who are wise and learned in their own sight will be humbly ruled or governed by others. Therefore, it is better to have little learning with humility than great learning and great pleasure in it; it is better to have a little learning with grace than much learning of which you are proud. pp 114-115

Do you think that worldly men suffer little or nothing? You certainly will find no one without some trouble, though you seek out the most privileged of people. . .

Even when they lived they were not without great bitterness and grief, for the very things in which they had the greatest pleasure often gave them great trouble and pain afterwards. p 122

There is no worse and no more threatening enemy to your soul than yourself, if your flesh is not submissive to the will of the spirit. It behooves you, therefore, to have a true deprecation and contempt of yourself, if you would prevail against your flesh and blood. p 124

Sometimes, people who seem to have great works of virtue have fallen low indeed and I have seen those who were fired with the bread of angels afterwards delight in the food of swine. p 125

My son, says our Saviour Christ, you should speak thus in everything that you desire: Lord, if it be Your will, be it done as I ask, and if it be to Your praise, let it be fulfilled in Your name. And if you see that it is good and profitable to me, give me grace to use it to your honor; if You know it to be hurtful to me, and not profitable to the health of my soul, then take away from me such desire. p 126

My son, says our Lord, I descended from heaven and for your help I have taken your miseries, not compelled to do so by necessity, but by My charity, so that you should learn with Me to have patience and not to refuse to bear the miseries and the wretchedness of this life as I have done for you. From the first hour of My birth unto My death upon the cross, I was never without some sorrow or pain. I had great lack of temporal things; I heard great complaints made against me; I suffered humbly many shames and rebukes. For My benefits I received unkindness; for My miracles, blasphemies; for My true doctrine, many reproofs. p 130

My son, what is it you say? Why do you thus complain? Cease, cease, complain no more. Consider My Passion and the passion of My saints, and you will see well that what you suffer for Me is very little. You have not yet suffered to the shedding of your blood, and surely you have suffered little in comparison with those who have suffered so many great things from Me in time past, and those who have been so strongly tempted, so grievously troubled and in so many ways put to the test. p 131

My son, now I shall teach you the truest way of peace and of perfect liberty. Study, my son, to fulfill another man's will rather than your own. Choose always to have a little worldly riches rather than much. Seek, also, the lowest place, and desire to be under others rather than above them; desire always and pray that the will of God be wholly done in you. Lo, such a person enters surely into the very true way of peace and inward quiet. p 139

O Lord, what shall I do to come to peace? You shall in all your works take good heed what you do and say, and you shall set your whole intention to please Me, and you shall desire and seek nothing without Me, and you shall not judge presumptuously of other men's deeds, nor shall you meddle with things that do not pertain to you. If you do this, it may be that you will be little or seldom troubled. Still, never to feel any

manner or trouble or suffer any weariness in body or soul is not the condition of this life, but of the life to come. pp 142-143

Love of yourself hurts you more than any other thing in this world. p 145

When transitory things are possessed and greatly multiplied in the world, they do not always help a man's soul to peace. But they help, rather, when they are despised and fully cut away from the love and desire of the heart. And this is to be fully understood not only of gold and silver and other worldly riches, but also of the desire of honor and praise in the world, which shortly vanish and pass away as smoke upon the wind.

Place helps little if the spirit of fervor is absent, and the peace a man gains outwardly will not stand whole if it lacks true inward peace of heart. Though you change your place, it will improve you little unless you stand firm and steadfast in Me. For by new occasions that daily arise you will find the very things from which you fled. pp 145-146

It is no little wisdom for a man to keep himself in silence and in good peace when evil words are spoken to him, and to turn his heart to God and not be troubled with man's judgement. . .

Do not let your peace depend on the hearts of men; whatever they say about you, good or bad, you are not because of it another man, for as you are, you are. . .

He who neither desires to please men nor fears to displease them will have great plenty of peace; for all disquiet of heart and restlessness of mind come from inordinate love and groundless fear. p 147

I said to My disciples: as My Father loves Me, so I love you, and yet I sent them forth into the world not to have temporal joy, but to meet great battles; not to have honors, but injuries; not to be idle, but to labor; not to rest, but to bring forth much good fruit in patience and in good works. p 150

There is a great difference between the wisdom of a devout man, enlightened by grace, and the learning of a subtle and studious scholar; that learning which comes by the influence and gracious gift of God is much more noble and worthy than that learning which is gained by the labor and study of man. p 151

If, in any perils and doubt, you do not stand according to the outward appearance, but if, in every such doubt, you enter into your soul by prayer, as Moses went into the tabernacle to ask counsel of God, you will soon hear the answer of our Lord which will instruct you sufficiently in many things, both present and to come. p 161

My son, says our Lord, do not let fair and subtle words move you, for the kingdom of heaven does not stand in words, but in good, virtuous works. p 165

I am He who suddenly illuminates and lifts up a humble soul, so that it can take and receive in short time the true reason of the wisdom of God more perfectly than another who studies ten years in the schools and lacks humility. I teach without sound

of words, without diversity of opinions, without desire for honor, and without strife and arguments.

p 166

Think all the world as nothing and prefer My service before all things, for you cannot have your mind fixed on Me and at the same time delight in transitory pleasure. It behooves you, therefore, to withdraw from your dearest friends and from all your acquaintances, and to seclude your mind wholly from the inordinate desire of worldly comfort as much as you can. St. Peter prayed that all Christian people might consider themselves strangers and pilgrims upon earth, for then they would set but little price on the comforts of earth.

pp 184-185

Grace favors the poor more than the rich; she sympathizes more with an innocent man than with a powerful man; she always rejoices in truth rather than falsehood, and strengthens good men more and more to profit and grow in virtue and goodness, and daily to seek gifts of grace so that they may, through good virtuous works, be made like to the Son of God.

p 188

Nature desires to know and hear new secret things; she yearns that her works be openly displayed, and to have experiences of many things in the world by her outward senses; she desires also to be known and to do great things in the world, so that admiration and praise may follow. But grace does not care for any new or curious things, whatever they may be, for she knows well that all such vanities arise from corruption of sin and that nothing new can long endure upon earth. Grace instructs us to control the outward senses, and to avoid all vain pleasure and external show, and humbly keeps secret things that would greatly be marveled at and praised in the world.

pp 188-189

Grace is a light from heaven, and a spiritual gift of God. It is the proper mark and token of the elect, and a presage of everlasting life. It lifts a man from the love of earthly things to the love of heavenly things, and makes a worldly man heavenly.

p 189

Remember, you are a man and not God; a man of flesh, and no angel. How can you always stand in one state of virtue, when that was not given to the angels in heaven or to the first man in paradise, who did not long stand firm. I am He who raises those who are sorrowful to help and comfort, and lifts up those who know their own unsteadiness to be grounded firm in the sight of my Godhead forever.

p 194

My son, beware not to dispute of high matters and of the secret judgements of God; why this man is so abandoned and forsaken by God, and why this man is given so much grace; why, also, one man is so much troubled, and another is so greatly advanced. These things surpass all man's knowledge and no man's reason or inquisition can suffice to search God's judgements.

p 195

BOOK IV: WHICH TREATS ESPECIALLY OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

Illumine my eyes also to see and behold so great a mystery, and to strengthen me so that I may always faithfully and unswervingly believe it. It is Your operation, and not the power of man; Your holy institution, and not man's invention. Therefore, no man is sufficient unto himself to grasp and understand these things, for they surpass the subtlety of all angels and heavenly spirits. pp 211-212

If a man do all he can and if he is truly penitent, as often as he comes to Me for grace and forgiveness, I am the Lord who says: I will not the death of a sinner, but rather that he be converted and live. I shall no more remember his sins, but they will all be forgiven and pardoned him. p 217

A free offering of yourself into the hands of God must precede all your works if you will obtain grace and true liberty. And so it happens that so few are inwardly illuminated and free, because they cannot wholly forsake themselves. p 218

If you desire that I should come to you and dwell with you, free yourself of the old filth of sin and cleanse also the habitation of your heart. Exclude the world and all the clamorous noise of sin, and sit solitary as a sparrow on the eaves of a house, and think upon your own offenses with great bitterness of heart, for a true lover will prepare for his beloved the best and fairest place he can for that is a sign of the love and affection of him who receives his friends. Nevertheless, I know that you cannot, by yourself, make this preparation fully as it ought to be in every point, though you were to go about it for a whole year together and had nothing else in your mind to think about. By My mercy and grace alone you are allowed to go to My table, as if a poor man were called to the dinner of a rich man and had nothing to give him in return, save only to humble himself and thank him. Do this as far as you can with your best diligence and do not do it out of custom only, or out of necessity only, because you are bound to do it, but out of awe and reverence and great affection. p 226

You have need of me; I do not have need of you. You do not come to sanctify Me, but I come to sanctify you and to make you better than you were before. You come to be sanctified and united to Me and to receive new grace and to be kindled anew to amendment. Do not forget this grace, but always, with all your diligence, prepare your heart, and bring your Beloved unto you. p 227

