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THOMAS À KEMPIS THE IMITATION OF CHRIST



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宗教

THOMAS À KEMPIS was born at Kempen near Düsseldorf in 1380. At thirteen he left the local grammar school to join his elder brother John who had attached himself to the Congregation of the Common Life. This community had been founded by Gerald Groote in 1376 to challenge the laxity of the times by a return to apostolic zeal and simplicity. In 1399 Thomas' mentor Florentius allowed him to travel to Zwolle to seek admission to the new monastery at Mount S. Agnes, where his brother had become Prior. He was professed in 1406 and received the priesthood in 1413 at the age of thirty-three. Thomas wrote many other devotional works besides *The Imitation of Christ*, his masterpiece, and several biographies including those of Gerald Groote and Florentius Radewyn; indeed, his long life was devoted to the study of the Scriptures and the Early Fathers. In 1425 he was elected Sub-Prior, acted as the Master of the Novices and kept the monastery's Chronicle. He died in 1471.

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TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
LEO SHERLEY-PRICE



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INTRODUCTION

THE CHARACTER OF THE *IMITATION*

It would be impossible to estimate the wide and profound influence that this wonderful little book has exercised throughout Christendom for over five hundred years. After the Bible itself, no other work can compare with its profound wisdom, clarity of thought, and converting power. Christians of such widely differing period and outlook as S. Thomas More and General Gordon, S. Ignatius Loyola and John Wesley, S. Francis Xavier and Dr Johnson, are but a few of the thousands who have acknowledged their debt to this golden work.

It may perhaps appear strange that a book written by one who spent nearly the whole of his long life in the cloister, and who intended his works primarily for his fellow-religious, should have such power to guide and inspire hundreds who have little knowledge of monastic life: but the writer's deep and burning love of God, his deep humility, his profound knowledge of the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers, coupled with his understanding of human nature and its needs, make him a wise and trustworthy counsellor to all who seek to know and fulfil the true purpose of human life – 'to praise, love and serve God their Lord, and by doing these things, to save their souls'.¹ Accordingly, while Thomas à Kempis writes in the first place for his fellow-religious, an ascetic for ascetics, a mystic for those who aspire to mystical union with God through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, yet his counsels are a proved guide and inspiration to men and women of every age and nation.

The secret of the amazing influence and converting power of this little book is the secret of the lives of all the Saints – their nearness to God, and the reflection of His love in their lives and writings. Thomas's theme is the love, mercy, and holiness of God; with vivid clarity he shows man's complete dependence on, and need of, God, and the empty futility of life lived apart from its only source of true Life and Light: he stirs us to seek our own good and lasting happiness in the

I. S. Ignatius Loyola *Spiritual Exercises*.

INTRODUCTION

knowledge and service of God. In the words of S. Augustine, Patron of the Order of Canons Regular to which Thomas himself belonged, 'O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.' In simple and burning words, Thomas shows that the only road to this sublime goal of oneness with God is by devotion to Christ Crucified, and by treading his 'Royal Road to the Holy Cross'.¹ Moreover, while the author is both a mystic and a scholar, he is always – like S. Teresa of Avila – eminently realistic and practical, and he shows us the 'how' as well as the 'why' of the spiritual life.

In his authoritative work on *à Kempis*, the late Dr F. R. Cruise writes: 'Beyond doubt, the *Imitation* most perfectly reflects the light which Jesus Christ brought down from heaven to earth, and truthfully portrays the highest Christian philosophy. When our divine Saviour preached the Sermon on the Mount, He held up as the characteristics of His followers – perfect humility, poverty of spirit, purity of heart, meekness, sorrow for sin, forgiveness of injustice, and peace and joy in the midst of persecution. Nowhere else do we find these doctrines so incisively and persuasively taught as in this unpretending little volume.'²

There is a common tendency today to represent the Saints as experts in 'natural' religion or 'perennial philosophy'; as men and women who, by breaking the chains of Christian dogma, have been enabled by their own natural genius to attain to union with the Divine. Probably the most frequent victim of such misrepresentation is that most loyal son of the Church, S. Francis of Assisi. But in the *Imitation*, as in the lives of the Saints, will be found sincere and reasoned loyalty to the teachings of Christ and His holy Catholic Church, and Thomas lays emphasis on right belief as the prerequisite of right life. He is no nature-mystic, nor would he regard as worthy of serious consideration many modern attempts to ignore the true nature of man, or to produce a synthesis of Christian and pagan philosophies as a guide to the spiritual life. For Thomas, as for all Christians, the sole road to God is through the power and teachings of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man; by the subordination of nature to divine

1. *Imitation*, ii, 12. 2. *Thomas à Kempis*, Kegan Paul (London 1887).

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grace; by self-discipline; and by devout use of the Sacraments of the Catholic Church, in particular that of the Holy Eucharist.

The modern reader will perhaps find minor portions of the book, such as the chapters on monastic life,¹ inapplicable in detail to his own needs, but they stand as a worthwhile reminder that the fundamental spirit and intention of the Religious Orders is identical with that of all devout Christians, i.e. the following of Christ and the pursuit of perfection. The widespread revival of the Religious Life during the past century, and its call for selfless service to God and man, provides a living witness and effective admonition that the Christian life requires personal discipline and self-sacrifice, coupled with unswerving loyalty to the Person and teachings of Christ our Saviour. The powerful challenge of godless Communism today would make small headway if all those 'who profess and call themselves Christians' were as active and devoted in the following of Christ as are many of their adversaries in the service of anti-Christ. And it is this very devotion to Christ and His Church that Thomas seeks to stimulate.

Commenting on the purpose and nature of the *Imitation*, one writer says: 'The philosophy of the *Imitation* may be summed up in two words. It is a philosophy of Light, and a philosophy of Life:² the Light of Truth, and the Life of Grace. Both the one and the other à Kempis seeks as their source and fountain-head. He does not separate them. It is only in the union of both that man attains his philosophic ideal. . . . So the Devout author, with Clement of Alexandria and Aquinas, ascends to the Incarnate Word – the divine *Logos* – as the Source whence proceeds all truth, both natural and revealed, for the criterion and ideal of human knowledge. Here he finds unity and harmony . . . it is not only the Light of Truth; it is also the Life of Grace. This life consists in the practice of the Christian virtues; the practice of the Christian virtues leads up to union with Christ; and union with Christ is consummated in the Holy Eucharist. Such is the author's philosophy of life, and in its development does his genius especially glow. He is mystical, eloquent, sublime. He soars into the highest regions of truth, in which meet both poetry and philosophy. Following in the footsteps of Christ, heeding His words, living in intimate union with Him, loving Him with a love that counts no

1. i, 17-20.

2. See *Imitation*, iii, 23.

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sacrifice too great, trampling underfoot all things displeasing to Him, bearing one's burden cheerfully for His sake – such is the life of the soul as revealed in this wonderful book.¹

Thomas à Kempis is not only a master of the spiritual life, he is a master writer as well; consequently we have in the *Imitation* a classic that richly repays careful study and re-reading. As with the Scriptures, the more familiar we are with this book, the fairer the riches we discover in its pages, and the more it becomes a part of ourselves. Open it where one will; on every page will be found something to instruct, to inspire, to give ample food for thought.

It is hardly surprising that a man of Thomas's spiritual and mental powers was widely and soundly read in the best both of pagan and Christian literature. Every page glows with the reflected light of holy Scripture, which he knows so intimately; but he loves also to draw from the wisdom of the Christian Fathers, and from the great philosophers of Greece and Rome, in order to confirm and illustrate his teaching. Anyone familiar with the writings of S. Bernard, S. Augustine, and S. Thomas Aquinas can readily detect the thought of these great theologians, while Thomas also draws from Ovid, Seneca, and Aristotle. Like the householder of the Gospels, 'he brings out of his treasure things new and old',² to illustrate the great truths of God, man, and life.

OUTLOOK OF THE BOOK

BOOK ONE: *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*

Here Thomas seeks firstly to wean the soul from preoccupation with solely material interests, successes and failures, and from dependence on its fellows, and to set before it the Christian teaching on life, on human nature, and on its essential need of God. He shows how, by winning control of our passions, and by overcoming conceit and complacency, we may, like S. Paul, become spiritual athletes, and enter upon the way of purgation, which is the first stage of the soul's

1. *The Culture of the Spiritual Sense*, by Bro. Azarias. (Steigel & Co., New York, 1884).

2. Matt. xiii, 52.

progress towards its divinely appointed destiny of union with God. Sincere self-knowledge will bring the soul to a realization of its own nothingness and need of God. The humble following of Christ, and the power of His grace alone can transform our lives, 'for if you rely on your own reasoning and ability rather than on the transforming power of Jesus Christ, you will seldom and only slowly attain wisdom. For God wills that we become perfectly obedient to Him, and that we rise above cold reason on the wings of a burning love for Him.'¹ The Book continues with counsels addressed primarily to Religious, but which are also of value to all who pursue perfection. It concludes by urging the disciple to complete the good work of purgation now begun and sets before him considerations on true contrition, on man's last end, on God's judgement of sinners and man's need of amendment.

BOOK TWO: *On the Inner Life*

This sets forth the second stage of the spiritual life – the way of illumination – in which the disciple, having made some progress in self-conquest, is gradually illumined by the divine light of the knowledge of God. Here Thomas sets forth the Christian standards of value, spiritual and material: we are shown how the spiritual and eternal is to be prized above the material and transitory, 'for men soon change, but Christ abides for ever, and stands firmly by you to the end' (Ch. 1). Through purity of heart and simplicity of purpose, man is raised and cleansed (Ch. 4) and by self-knowledge he is freed from the temptation to pass judgement on others (Ch. 5). The book continues, to speak of the wonders of the love of Jesus, and the glory of His friendship, that only His loved ones know (Chs. 7, 8): and shows that the only road to this desired consummation is that which Jesus Himself has revealed, the road of the Cross, so meaningless to the world, so powerful to the faithful pilgrim. Many fear to tread this hard road (Ch. 11), which is the sole road to God. Yet 'See, how in the Cross all things rest, and how in dying upon it all things depend. There is no other way to life and true inner peace than the way of the Cross, and of daily self-denial: ... our merit and spiritual progress do not consist in enjoying great delight and consolation, but rather in the

1. *Imit.* i, 14.

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bearing of great burdens and troubles' (Ch. 12). But the love of Jesus will amply outweigh all sacrifices, and light the steep upward path.

BOOK THREE: *On Inward Consolation*

In the third and longest book, Christ calls on the disciple to seek Him alone, and shows him the way of union and true peace. Aware of the perils that beset the steep ascent of the Mount of God, and seeing all things in their true light, the disciple is led to choose God as his true and only goal (Ch. 3). He is shown how, by the light of grace, he can gradually win free from the entanglements of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and come freely to Christ. In response, the disciple sings the joys and glories of the love of God, and prays: 'Deepen Your love in me, O Lord, that I may learn in my inmost heart how sweet it is to love, to be dissolved, and to plunge myself into Your love. Let Your love possess me, and raise me above myself with a fervour and wonder above all imagination. Let me sing the song of love. Let me follow You, my Beloved, into the heights. Let my soul spend itself in Your praise, rejoicing for love. . . .' (Ch. 5). There follow chapters of practical counsels on the Christian life: on the gradual conquest of self; on the divine virtues of love, obedience, patience, humility, and trust, which must be cultivated as the soul advances with God's help on the road towards perfection (Chs. 7-15). We are shown how holiness is not to be sought as an end in itself, but that we must rest in God alone above all other good, 'above all health and beauty, above all glory and honour, above all power and dignity, above all joy and gladness . . . and above all that is not Yourself, O my God' (Ch. 21). Christ then reveals (Ch. 23) four ways to obtain freedom and peace of spirit, 'the whole secret of perfection', and the disciple offers a most beautiful prayer for mental light. He is then shown (Ch. 25) how the true source of peace and progress rest 'in complete surrender of the heart to the will of God, not seeking to have one's own way either in great matters or small, in time or eternity'. Freedom of mind is not to be achieved by study so much as by prayer and direct contact with the Source of all light and life (Ch. 26). In the ensuing chapters the disciple is warned that obedience to Christ does not imply that he will be freed from sorrow, distraction, or temptation: rather will the Devil