

The Imitation of Christ



Thomas à Kempis

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The treatise "Of the Imitation of Christ" appears to have been originally written in Latin early in the fifteenth century. Its exact date and its authorship are still a matter of debate. Manuscripts of the Latin version survive in considerable numbers all over Western Europe, and they, with the vast list of translations and of printed editions, testify to its almost unparalleled popularity. One scribe attributes it to St. Bernard of Clairvaux; but the fact that it contains a quotation from St. Francis of Assisi, who was born thirty years after the death of St. Bernard, disposes of this theory. In England there exist many manuscripts of the first three books, called "Musica Ecclesiastica," frequently ascribed to the English mystic Walter Hilton. But Hilton seems to have died in 1395, and there is no evidence of the existence of the work before 1400. Many manuscripts scattered throughout Europe ascribe the book to Jean le Charlier de Gerson, the great Chancellor of the University of Paris, who was a leading figure in the Church in the earlier part of the fifteenth century. The most probable author, however, especially when the internal evidence is considered, is Thomas Haemmerlein, known also as Thomas a Kempis, from his native town of Kempen, near the Rhine, about forty miles north of Cologne. Haemmerlein, who was born in 1379 or 1380, was a member of the order of the Brothers of Common Life, and spent the last seventy years of his life at Mount St. Agnes, a monastery of Augustinian canons in the diocese of Utrecht. Here he died on July 26, 1471, after an uneventful life spent in copying manuscripts, reading, and composing, and in the peaceful routine of monastic piety.

With the exception of the Bible, no Christian writing has had so wide a vogue or so sustained a popularity as this. And yet, in one sense, it is hardly an original work at all. Its structure it owes largely to the writings of the medieval mystics, and its ideas and phrases are a mosaic from the Bible and the Fathers of the early Church. But these elements are interwoven with such delicate skill and a religious feeling at once so ardent and so sound, that it promises to remain, what it has been for five hundred years, the supreme call and guide to spiritual aspiration.

**THE FIRST BOOK. ADMONITIONS
PROFITABLE FOR THE SPIRITUAL
LIFE**

CHAPTER 1. OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST, AND OF CONTEMPT OF THE WORLD AND ALL ITS VANITIES

He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness,¹ saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ; and they teach us how far we must imitate His life and character, if we seek true illumination, and deliverance from all blindness of heart. Let it be our most earnest study, therefore, to dwell upon the life of Jesus Christ.

2. His teaching surpasseth all teaching of holy men, and such as have His Spirit find therein the hidden manna.² But there are many who, though they frequently hear the Gospel, yet feel but little longing after it, because they have not the mind of Christ. He, therefore, that will fully and with true wisdom understand the words of Christ, let him strive to conform his whole life to that mind of Christ.

3. What doth it profit thee to enter into deep discussion concerning the Holy Trinity, if thou lack humility, and be thus displeasing to the Trinity? For verily it is not deep words that make a man holy and upright; it is a good life which maketh a man dear to God. I had rather feel contrition than be skilful in the definition thereof. If thou knewest the whole Bible, and the sayings of all the philosophers, what should all this profit thee without the love and grace of God? Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, save to love God, and Him only to serve. That is the highest wisdom, to cast the world behind us, and to reach forward to the heavenly kingdom.

4. It is vanity then to seek after, and to trust in, the riches that shall perish. It is vanity, too, to covet honours, and to lift up ourselves on high. It is vanity to follow the desires of the flesh and be led by them, for this shall bring misery at the last. It is vanity to desire a long life, and to have little care for a good life. It is vanity to take thought only for the life which now is, and not to look forward to the things which shall be hereafter. It is vanity to love that which quickly passeth away, and not to hasten where eternal joy abideth.

5. Be oftentimes mindful of the saying,³ The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. Strive, therefore, to turn away thy heart from the love of the things that are seen, and to set it upon the

things that are not seen. For they who follow after their own fleshly
lusts, defile the conscience, and destroy the grace of God.

CHAPTER 2. OF THINKING HUMBLY OF ONESELF

There is naturally in every man a desire to know, but what profiteth knowledge without the fear of God? Better of a surety is a lowly peasant who serveth God, than a proud philosopher who watcheth the stars and neglecteth the knowledge of himself. He who knoweth himself well is vile in his own sight; neither regardeth he the praises of men. If I knew all the things that are in the world, and were not in charity, what should it help me before God, who is to judge me according to my deeds?

2. Rest from inordinate desire of knowledge, for therein is found much distraction and deceit. Those who have knowledge desire to appear learned, and to be called wise. Many things there are to know which profiteth little or nothing to the soul. And foolish out of measure is he who attendeth upon other things rather than those which serve to his soul's health. Many words satisfy not the soul, but a good life refresheth the mind, and a pure conscience giveth great confidence towards God.

3. The greater and more complete thy knowledge, the more severely shalt thou be judged, unless thou hast lived holily. Therefore be not lifted up by any skill or knowledge that thou hast; but rather fear concerning the knowledge which is given to thee. If it seemeth to thee that thou knowest many things, and understandest them well, know also that there are many more things which thou knowest not. Be not high-minded, but rather confess thine ignorance. Why desirest thou to lift thyself above another, when there are found many more learned and more skilled in the Scripture than thou? If thou wilt know and learn anything with profit, love to be thyself unknown and to be counted for nothing.

4. That is the highest and most profitable lesson, when a man truly knoweth and judgeth lowly of himself. To account nothing of one's self, and to think always kindly and highly of others, this is great and perfect wisdom. Even shouldst thou see thy neighbor sin openly or grievously, yet thou oughtest not to reckon thyself better than he, for thou knowest not how long thou shalt keep thine integrity. All of us are weak and frail; hold thou no man more frail than thyself.

CHAPTER 3. OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH

Happy is the man whom Truth by itself doth teach, not by figures and transient words, but as it is in itself.⁴ Our own judgment and feelings often deceive us, and we discern but little of the truth. What doth it profit to argue about hidden and dark things, concerning which we shall not be even reprov'd in the judgment, because we knew them not? Oh, grievous folly, to neglect the things which are profitable and necessary, and to give our minds to things which are curious and hurtful! Having eyes, we see not.

2. And what have we to do with talk about genus and species! He to whom the Eternal Word speaketh is free from multiplied questionings. From this One Word are all things, and all things speak of Him; and this is the Beginning which also speaketh unto us.⁵ No man without Him understandeth or rightly judgeth. The man to whom all things are one, who bringeth all things to one, who seeth all things in one, he is able to remain steadfast of spirit, and at rest in God. O God, who art the Truth, make me one with Thee in everlasting love. It wearieth me oftentimes to read and listen to many things; in Thee is all that I wish for and desire. Let all the doctors hold their peace; let all creation keep silence before Thee: speak Thou alone to me.

3. The more a man hath unity and simplicity in himself, the more things and the deeper things he understandeth; and that without labour, because he receiveth the light of understanding from above. The spirit which is pure, sincere, and steadfast, is not distracted though it hath many works to do, because it doth all things to the honour of God, and striveth to be free from all thoughts of self-seeking. Who is so full of hindrance and annoyance to thee as thine own undisciplined heart? A man who is good and devout arrangeth beforehand within his own heart the works which he hath to do abroad; and so is not drawn away by the desires of his evil will, but subjecteth everything to the judgment of right reason. Who hath a harder battle to fight than he who striveth for self-mastery? And this should be our endeavour, even to master self, and thus daily to grow stronger than self, and go on unto perfection.

4. All perfection hath some imperfection joined to it in this life, and all our power of sight is not without some darkness. A lowly knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than the deep searching of man's learning. Not that learning is to be blamed, nor the taking account of anything that is good; but a good conscience and a holy life is better than all. And because many seek knowledge rather than good living, therefore they go astray, and bear little or no fruit.

5. O if they would give that diligence to the rooting out of vice and the planting of virtue which they give unto vain questionings: there had not been so many evil doings and stumbling-blocks among the laity, nor such ill living among houses of religion. Of a surety, at the Day of Judgment it will be demanded of us, not what we have read, but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how holily we have lived. Tell me, where now are all those masters and teachers, whom thou knewest well, whilst they were yet with you, and flourished in learning? Their stalls are now filled by others, who perhaps never have one thought concerning them. Whilst they lived they seemed to be somewhat, but now no one speaks of them.

6. Oh how quickly passeth the glory of the world away! Would that their life and knowledge had agreed together! For then would they have read and inquired unto good purpose. How many perish through empty learning in this world, who care little for serving God. And because they love to be great more than to be humble, therefore they "have become vain in their imaginations." He only is truly great, who hath great charity. He is truly great who deemeth himself small, and counteth all height of honour as nothing. He is the truly wise man, who counteth all earthly things as dung that he may win Christ. And he is the truly learned man, who doeth the will of God, and forsaketh his own will.

CHAPTER 4. OF PRUDENCE IN ACTION

We must not trust every word of others or feeling within ourselves, but cautiously and patiently try the matter, whether it be of God. Unhappily we are so weak that we find it easier to believe and speak evil of others, rather than good. But they that are perfect, do not give ready heed to every news-bearer, for they know man's weakness that it is prone to evil and unstable in words.

2. This is great wisdom, not to be hasty in action, or stubborn in our own opinions. A part of this wisdom also is not to believe every word we hear, nor to tell others all that we hear, even though we believe it. Take counsel with a man who is wise and of a good conscience; and seek to be instructed by one better than thyself, rather than to follow thine own inventions. A good life maketh a man wise toward God, and giveth him experience in many things. The more humble a man is in himself, and the more obedient towards God, the wiser will he be in all things, and the more shall his soul be at peace.

CHAPTER 5. OF THE READING OF HOLY SCRIPTURES

It is Truth which we must look for in Holy Writ, not cunning of words. All Scripture ought to be read in the spirit in which it was written. We must rather seek for what is profitable in Scripture, than for what ministereth to subtlety in discourse. Therefore we ought to read books which are devotional and simple, as well as those which are deep and difficult. And let not the weight of the writer be a stumbling-block to thee, whether he be of little or much learning, but let the love of the pure Truth draw thee to read. Ask not, who hath said this or that, but look to what he says.

2. Men pass away, but the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Without respect of persons God speaketh to us in divers manners. Our own curiosity often hindereth us in the reading of holy writings, when we seek to understand and discuss, where we should pass simply on. If thou wouldst profit by thy reading, read humbly, simply, honestly, and not desiring to win a character for learning. Ask freely, and hear in silence the words of holy men; nor be displeased at the hard sayings of older men than thou, for they are not uttered without cause.

CHAPTER 6. OF INORDINATE AFFECTIONS

Whensoever a man desireth aught above measure, immediately he becometh restless. The proud and the avaricious man are never at rest; while the poor and lowly of heart abide in the multitude of peace. The man who is not yet wholly dead to self, is soon tempted, and is overcome in small and trifling matters. It is hard for him who is weak in spirit, and still in part carnal and inclined to the pleasures of sense, to withdraw himself altogether from earthly desires. And therefore, when he withdraweth himself from these, he is often sad, and easily angered too if any oppose his will.

2. But if, on the other hand, he yield to his inclination, immediately he is weighed down by the condemnation of his conscience; for that he hath followed his own desire, and yet in no way attained the peace which he hoped for. For true peace of heart is to be found in resisting passion, not in yielding to it. And therefore there is no peace in the heart of a man who is carnal, nor in him who is given up to the things that are without him, but only in him who is fervent towards God and living the life of the Spirit.

CHAPTER 7. OF FLEEING FROM VAIN HOPE AND PRIDE

Vain is the life of that man who putteth his trust in men or in any created Thing. Be not ashamed to be the servant of others for the love of Jesus Christ, and to be reckoned poor in this life. Rest not upon thyself, but build thy hope in God. Do what lieth in thy power, and God will help thy good intent. Trust not in thy learning, nor in the cleverness of any that lives, but rather trust in the favour of God, who resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.

2. Boast not thyself in thy riches if thou hast them, nor in thy friends if they be powerful, but in God, who giveth all things, and in addition to all things desireth to give even Himself. Be not lifted up because of thy strength or beauty of body, for with only a slight sickness it will fail and wither away. Be not vain of thy skilfulness or ability, lest thou displease God, from whom cometh every good gift which we have.

3. Count not thyself better than others, lest perchance thou appear worse in the sight of God, who knoweth what is in man. Be not proud of thy good works, for God's judgments are of another sort than the judgments of man, and what pleaseth man is oftentimes displeasing to Him. If thou hast any good, believe that others have more, and so thou mayest preserve thy humility. It is no harm to thee if thou place thyself below all others; but it is great harm if thou place thyself above even one. Peace is ever with the humble man, but in the heart of the proud there is envy and continual wrath.

CHAPTER 8. OF THE DANGER OF TOO MUCH FAMILIARITY

Open not thine heart to every man, but deal with one who is wise and feareth God. Be seldom with the young and with strangers. Be not a flatterer of the rich; nor willingly seek the society of the great. Let thy company be the humble and the simple, the devout and the gentle, and let thy discourse be concerning things which edify. Be not familiar with any woman, but commend all good women alike unto God. Choose for thy companions God and His Angels only, and flee from the notice of men.

2. We must love all men, but not make close companions of all. It sometimes falleth out that one who is unknown to us is highly regarded through good report of him, whose actual person is nevertheless displeasing to those who behold it. We sometimes think to please others by our intimacy, and forthwith displease them the more by the faultiness of character which they perceive in us.

CHAPTER 9. OF OBEDIENCE AND SUBJECTION

It is verily a great thing to live in obedience, to be under authority, and not to be at our own disposal. Far safer is it to live in subjection than in a place of authority. Many are in obedience from necessity rather than from love; these take it amiss, and repine for small cause. Nor will they gain freedom of spirit, unless with all their heart they submit themselves for the love of God. Though thou run hither and thither, thou wilt not find peace, save in humble subjection to the authority of him who is set over thee. Fancies about places and change of them have deceived many.

2. True it is that every man willingly followeth his own bent, and is the more inclined to those who agree with him. But if Christ is amongst us, then it is necessary that we sometimes yield up our own opinion for the sake of peace. Who is so wise as to have perfect knowledge of all things? Therefore trust not too much to thine own opinion, but be ready also to hear the opinions of others. Though thine own opinion be good, yet if for the love of God thou foregoest it, and followest that of another, thou shalt the more profit thereby.

3. Ofttimes I have heard that it is safer to hearken and to receive counsel than to give it. It may also come to pass that each opinion may be good; but to refuse to hearken to others when reason or occasion requireth it, is a mark of pride or wilfulness.

CHAPTER 10. OF THE DANGER OF SUPERFLUITY OF WORDS

Avoid as far as thou canst the tumult of men; for talk concerning worldly things, though it be innocently undertaken, is a hindrance, so quickly are we led captive and defiled by vanity. Many a time I wish that I had held my peace, and had not gone amongst men. But why do we talk and gossip so continually, seeing that we so rarely resume our silence without some hurt done to our conscience? We like talking so much because we hope by our conversations to gain some mutual comfort, and because we seek to refresh our wearied spirits by variety of thoughts. And we very willingly talk and think of those things which we love or desire, or else of those which we most dislike.

2. But alas! it is often to no purpose and in vain. For this outward consolation is no small hindrance to the inner comfort which cometh from God. Therefore must we watch and pray that time pass not idly away. If it be right and desirable for thee to speak, speak things which are to edification. Evil custom and neglect of our real profit tend much to make us heedless of watching over our lips. Nevertheless, devout conversation on spiritual things helpeth not a little to spiritual progress, most of all where those of kindred mind and spirit find their ground of fellowship in God.

CHAPTER 11. OF SEEKING PEACE OF MIND AND OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

We may enjoy abundance of peace if we refrain from busying ourselves with the sayings and doings of others, and things which concern not ourselves. How can he abide long time in peace who occupieth himself with other men's matters, and with things without himself, and meanwhile payeth little or rare heed to the self within? Blessed are the single-hearted, for they shall have abundance of peace.

2. How came it to pass that many of the Saints were so perfect, so contemplative of Divine things? Because they steadfastly sought to mortify themselves from all worldly desires, and so were enabled to cling with their whole heart to God, and be free and at leisure for the thought of Him. We are too much occupied with our own affections, and too anxious about transitory things. Seldom, too, do we entirely conquer even a single fault, nor are we zealous for daily growth in grace. And so we remain lukewarm and unspiritual.

3. Were we fully watchful of ourselves, and not bound in spirit to outward things, then might we be wise unto salvation, and make progress in Divine contemplation. Our great and grievous stumbling-block is that, not being freed from our affections and desires, we strive not to enter into the perfect way of the Saints. And when even a little trouble befalleth us, too quickly are we cast down, and fly to the world to give us comfort.

4. If we would quit ourselves like men, and strive to stand firm in the battle, then should we see the Lord helping us from Heaven. For He Himself is alway ready to help those who strive and who trust in Him; yea, He provideth for us occasions of striving, to the end that we may win the victory. If we look upon our progress in religion as a progress only in outward observances and forms, our devoutness will soon come to an end. But let us lay the axe to the very root of our life, that, being cleansed from affections, we may possess our souls in peace.

5. If each year should see one fault rooted out from us, we should go quickly on to perfection. But on the contrary, we often feel that we were better and holier in the beginning of our conversion than after many years of profession. Zeal and progress ought to increase day by day; yet now it seemeth a great thing if one is able to retain some portion of his first ardour. If we would put some slight stress on ourselves at the beginning, then afterwards we should be able to do all things with ease and joy.

6. It is a hard thing to break through a habit, and a yet harder thing to go contrary to our own will. Yet if thou overcome not slight and easy obstacles, how shalt thou overcome greater ones? Withstand thy will at the beginning, and unlearn an evil habit, lest it lead thee little by little

into worse difficulties. Oh, if thou knewest what peace to thyself thy holy life should bring to thyself, and what joy to others, methinketh thou wouldst be more zealous for spiritual profit.

CHAPTER 12. OF THE USES OF ADVERSITY

It is good for us that we sometimes have sorrows and adversities, for they often make a man lay to heart that he is only a stranger and sojourner, and may not put his trust in any worldly thing. It is good that we sometimes endure contradictions, and are hardly and unfairly judged, when we do and mean what is good. For these things help us to be humble, and shield us from vain-glory. For then we seek the more earnestly the witness of God, when men speak evil of us falsely, and give us no credit for good.

2. Therefore ought a man to rest wholly upon God, so that he needeth not seek much comfort at the hand of men. When a man who feareth God is afflicted or tried or oppressed with evil thoughts, then he seeth that God is the more necessary unto him, since without God he can do no good thing. Then he is heavy of heart, he groaneth, he crieth out for the very disquietness of his heart. Then he groweth weary of life, and would fain depart and be with Christ. By all this he is taught that in the world there can be no perfect security or fulness of peace.

CHAPTER 13. OF RESISTING TEMPTATION

So long as we live in the world, we cannot be without trouble and trial. Wherefore it is written in Job, The life of man upon the earth is a trial.⁶ And therefore ought each of us to give heed concerning trials and temptations, and watch unto prayer, lest the devil find occasion to deceive; for he never sleepeth, but goeth about seeking whom he may devour. No man is so perfect in holiness that he hath never temptations, nor can we ever be wholly free from them.

2. Yet, notwithstanding, temptations turn greatly unto our profit, even though they be great and hard to bear; for through them we are humbled, purified, instructed. All Saints have passed through much tribulation and temptation, and have profited thereby. And they who endured not temptation became reprobate and fell away. There is no position so sacred, no place so secret, that it is without temptations and adversities.

3. There is no man wholly free from temptations so long as he liveth, because we have the root of temptation within ourselves, in that we are born in concupiscence. One temptation or sorrow passeth, and another cometh; and always we shall have somewhat to suffer, for we have fallen from perfect happiness. Many who seek to fly from temptations fall yet more deeply into them. By flight alone we cannot overcome, but by endurance and true humility we are made stronger than all our enemies.

4. He who only resisteth outwardly and pulleth not up by the root, shall profit little; nay, rather temptations will return to him the more quickly, and will be the more terrible. Little by little, through patience and longsuffering, thou shalt conquer by the help of God, rather than by violence and thine own strength of will. In the midst of temptation often seek counsel; and deal not hardly with one who is tempted, but comfort and strengthen him as thou wouldest have done unto thyself.

5. The beginning of all temptations to evil is instability of temper and want of trust in God; for even as a ship without a helm is tossed about by the waves, so is a man who is careless and infirm of purpose tempted, now on this side, now on that. As fire testeth iron, so doth temptation the upright man. Oftentimes we know not what strength we have; but temptation revealeth to us what we are. Nevertheless, we must watch, especially in the beginnings of temptation; for then is the foe the more easily mastered, when he is not suffered to enter within the mind, but is met outside the door as soon as he hath knocked. Wherefore one saith,

Check the beginnings; once thou might'st have cured,

But now 'tis past thy skill, too long hath it endured.

For first cometh to the mind the simple suggestion, then the strong imagination, afterwards pleasure, evil affection, assent.

And so little by little the enemy entereth in altogether, because he was not resisted at the beginning. And the longer a man delayeth his resistance, the weaker he groweth, and the stronger groweth the enemy against him.

6. Some men suffer their most grievous temptations in the beginning of their conversion, some at the end. Some are sorely tried their whole life long. Some there are who are tempted but lightly, according to the wisdom and justice of the ordering of God, who knoweth the character and circumstances of men, and ordereth all things for the welfare of His elect.

7. Therefore we ought not to despair when we are tempted, but the more fervently should cry unto God, that He will vouchsafe to help us in all our tribulation; and that He will, as St. Paul saith, with the temptation make a way to escape that we may be able to bear it.⁷ Let us therefore humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God in all temptation and trouble, for He will save and exalt such as are of an humble spirit.

8. In temptations and troubles a man is proved, what progress he hath made, and therein is his reward the greater, and his virtue doth the more appear. Nor is it a great thing if a man be devout and zealous so long as he suffereth no affliction; but if he behave himself patiently in the time of adversity, then is there hope of great progress. Some are kept safe from great temptations, but are overtaken in those which are little and common, that the humiliation may teach them not to trust to themselves in great things, being weak in small things.

CHAPTER 14. ON AVOIDING RASH JUDGMENT

Look well unto thyself, and beware that thou judge not the doings of others. In judging others a man laboureth in vain; he often erreth, and easily falleth into sin; but in judging and examining himself he always laboureth to good purpose. According as a matter toucheth our fancy, so oftentimes do we judge of it; for easily do we fail of true judgment because of our own personal feeling. If God were always the sole object of our desire, we should the less easily be troubled by the erring judgment of our fancy.

2. But often some secret thought lurking within us, or even some outward circumstance, turneth us aside. Many are secretly seeking their own ends in what they do, yet know it not. They seem to live in good peace of mind so long as things go well with them, and according to their desires, but if their desires be frustrated and broken, immediately they are shaken and displeased. Diversity of feelings and opinions very often brings about dissensions between friends, between countrymen, between religious and godly men.

3. Established custom is not easily relinquished, and no man is very easily led to see with the eyes of another. If thou rest more upon thy own reason or experience than upon the power of Jesus Christ, thy light shall come slowly and hardly; for God willeth us to be perfectly subject unto Himself, and all our reason to be exalted by abundant love towards Him.

CHAPTER 15. OF WORKS OF CHARITY

For no worldly good whatsoever, and for the love of no man, must anything be done which is evil, but for the help of the suffering a good work must sometimes be postponed, or be changed for a better; for herein a good work is not destroyed, but improved. Without charity no work profiteth, but whatsoever is done in charity, however small and of no reputation it be, bringeth forth good fruit; for God verily considereth what a man is able to do, more than the greatness of what he doth.

2. He doth much who loveth much. He doth much who doth well. He doth well who ministereth to the public good rather than to his own. Oftentimes that seemeth to be charity which is rather carnality, because it springeth from natural inclination, self-will, hope of repayment, desire of gain.

3. He who hath true and perfect charity, in no wise seeketh his own good, but desireth that God alone be altogether glorified. He envieth none, because he longeth for no selfish joy; nor doth he desire to rejoice in himself, but longeth to be blessed in God as the highest good. He ascribeth good to none save to God only, the Fountain whence all good proceedeth, and the End, the Peace, the joy of all Saints. Oh, he who hath but a spark of true charity, hath verily learned that all worldly things are full of vanity.

CHAPTER 16. OF BEARING WITH THE FAULTS OF OTHERS

Those things which a man cannot amend in himself or in others, he ought patiently to bear, until God shall otherwise ordain. Bethink thee that perhaps it is better for thy trial and patience, without which our merits are but little worth. Nevertheless thou oughtest, when thou findest such impediments, to beseech God that He would vouchsafe to sustain thee, that thou be able to bear them with a good will.

2. If one who is once or twice admonished refuse to hearken, strive not with him, but commit all to God, that His will may be done and His honour be shown in His servants, for He knoweth well how to convert the evil unto good. Endeavour to be patient in bearing with other men's faults and infirmities whatsoever they be, for thou thyself also hast many things which have need to be borne with by others. If thou canst not make thine own self what thou desireth, how shalt thou be able to fashion another to thine own liking. We are ready to see others made perfect, and yet we do not amend our own shortcomings.

3. We will that others be straitly corrected, but we will not be corrected ourselves. The freedom of others displeaseth us, but we are dissatisfied that our own wishes shall be denied us. We desire rules to be made restraining others, but by no means will we suffer ourselves to be restrained. Thus therefore doth it plainly appear how seldom we weigh our neighbour in the same balance with ourselves. If all men were perfect, what then should we have to suffer from others for God?

4. But now hath God thus ordained, that we may learn to bear one another's burdens, because none is without defect, none without a burden, none sufficient of himself, none wise enough of himself; but it behoveth us to bear with one another, to comfort one another, to help, instruct, admonish one another. How much strength each man hath is best proved by occasions of adversity: for such occasions do not make a man frail, but show of what temper he is.

CHAPTER 17. OF A RELIGIOUS LIFE

It behoveth thee to learn to mortify thyself in many things, if thou wilt live in amity and concord with other men. It is no small thing to dwell in a religious community or congregation, and to live there without complaint, and therein to remain faithful even unto death. Blessed is he who hath lived a good life in such a body, and brought it to a happy end. If thou wilt stand fast and wilt profit as thou oughtest, hold thyself as an exile and a pilgrim upon the earth. Thou wilt have to be counted as a fool for Christ, if thou wilt lead a religious life.

2. The clothing and outward appearance are of small account; it is change of character and entire mortification of the affections which make a truly religious man. He who seeketh aught save God and the health of his soul, shall find only tribulation and sorrow. Nor can he stand long in peace, who striveth not to be least of all and servant of all.

3. Thou art called to endure and to labour, not to a life of ease and trifling talk. Here therefore are men tried as gold in the furnace. No man can stand, unless with all his heart he will humble himself for God's sake.

CHAPTER 18. OF THE EXAMPLE OF THE HOLY FATHERS

Consider now the lively examples of the holy fathers, in whom shone forth real perfectness and religion, and thou shalt see how little, even as nothing, is all that we do. Ah! What is our life when compared to theirs? They, saints and friends of Christ as they were, served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in labour and weariness, in watchings and fastings, in prayer and holy meditations, in persecutions and much rebuke.

2. O how many and grievous tribulations did the Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, Virgins, endure; and all others who would walk in the footsteps of Christ. For they hated their souls in this world that they might keep them unto life eternal. O how strict and retired a life was that of the holy fathers who dwelt in the desert! what long and grievous temptations they did suffer! how often were they assaulted by the enemy! what frequent and fervid prayers did they offer unto God! what strict fasts did they endure! what fervent zeal and desire after spiritual profit did they manifest! how bravely did they fight that their vices might not gain the mastery! how entirely and steadfastly did they reach after God! By day they laboured, and at night they gave themselves oftentimes unto prayer; yea, even when they were labouring they ceased not from mental prayer.

3. They spent their whole time profitably; every hour seemed short for retirement with God; and through the great sweetness of contemplation, even the need of bodily refreshment was forgotten. They renounced all riches, dignities, honours, friends, kinsmen; they desired nothing from the world; they ate the bare necessities of life; they were unwilling to minister to the body even in necessity. Thus were they poor in earthly things, but rich above measure in grace and virtue. Though poor to the outer eye, within they were filled with grace and heavenly benedictions.

4. They were strangers to the world, but unto God they were as kinsmen and friends. They seemed unto themselves as of no reputation, and in the world's eyes contemptible; but in the sight of God they were precious and beloved. They stood fast in true humility, they lived in simple obedience, they walked in love and patience; and thus they waxed strong in spirit, and obtained great favour before God. To all religious men they were given as an example, and they ought more to provoke us unto good livings than the number of the lukewarm tempteth to carelessness of life.

5. O how great was the love of all religious persons at the beginning of this sacred institution! O what devoutness of prayer! what rivalry in holiness! what strict discipline was observed! what reverence and obedience under the rule of the master showed they in all things! The

traces of them that remain until now testify that they were truly holy and perfect men, who fighting so bravely trod the world underfoot. Now a man is counted great if only he be not a transgressor, and if he can only endure with patience what he hath undertaken.

6. O the coldness and negligence of our times, that we so quickly decline from the former love, and it is become a weariness to live, because of sloth and lukewarmness. May progress in holiness not wholly fall asleep in thee, who many times hast seen so many examples of devout men!

CHAPTER 19. OF THE EXERCISES OF A RELIGIOUS MAN

The life of a Christian ought to be adorned with all virtues, that he may be inwardly what he outwardly appeareth unto men. And verily it should be yet better within than without, for God is a discernor of our heart, Whom we must reverence with all our hearts wheresoever we are, and walk pure in His presence as do the angels. We ought daily to renew our vows, and to kindle our hearts to zeal, as if each day were the first day of our conversion, and to say, "Help me, O God, in my good resolutions, and in Thy holy service, and grant that this day I may make a good beginning, for hitherto I have done nothing!"

2. According to our resolution so is the rate of our progress, and much diligence is needful for him who would make good progress. For if he who resolveth bravely oftentimes falleth short, how shall it be with him who resolveth rarely or feebly? But manifold causes bring about abandonment of our resolution, yet a trivial omission of holy exercises can hardly be made without some loss to us. The resolution of the righteous dependeth more upon the grace of God than upon their own wisdom; for in Him they always put their trust, whatsoever they take in hand. For man proposeth, but God disposeth; and the way of a man is not in himself.⁸

3. If a holy exercise be sometimes omitted for the sake of some act of piety, or of some brotherly kindness, it can easily be taken up afterwards; but if it be neglected through distaste or slothfulness, then is it sinful, and the mischief will be felt. Strive as earnestly as we may, we shall still fall short in many things. Always should some distinct resolution be made by us; and, most of all, we must strive against those sins which most easily beset us. Both our outer and inner life should be straitly examined and ruled by us, because both have to do with our progress.

4. If thou canst not be always examining thyself, thou canst at certain seasons, and at least twice in the day, at evening and at morning. In the morning make thy resolves, and in the evening inquire into thy life, how thou hast sped to-day in word, deed, and thought; for in these ways thou hast often perchance offended God and thy neighbour. Gird up thy lions like a man against the assaults of the devil; bridle thine appetite, and thou wilt soon be able to bridle every inclination of the flesh. Be thou

never without something to do; be reading, or writing, or praying, or meditating, or doing something that is useful to the community. Bodily exercises, however, must be undertaken with discretion, nor are they to be used by all alike.

5. The duties which are not common to all must not be done openly, but are safest carried on in secret. But take heed that thou be not careless in the common duties, and more devout in the secret; but faithfully and honestly discharge the duties and commands which lie upon thee, then afterwards, if thou hast still leisure, give thyself to thyself as thy devotion leadeth thee. All cannot have one exercise, but one suiteth better to this man and another to that. Even for the diversity of season different exercises are needed, some suit better for feasts, some for fasts. We need one kind in time of temptations and others in time of peace and quietness. Some are suitable to our times of sadness, and others when we are joyful in the Lord.

6. When we draw near the time of the great feasts, good exercises should be renewed, and the prayers of holy men more fervently besought. We ought to make our resolutions from one Feast to another, as if each were the period of our departure from this world, and of entering into the eternal feast. So ought we to prepare ourselves earnestly at solemn seasons, and the more solemnly to live, and to keep straightest watch upon each holy observance, as though we were soon to receive the reward of our labours at the hand of God.

7. And if this be deferred, let us believe ourselves to be as yet ill-prepared, and unworthy as yet of the glory which shall be revealed in us at the appointed season; and let us study to prepare ourselves the better for our end. Blessed is that servant, as the Evangelist Luke hath it, whom, when the Lord cometh He shall find watching. Verily I say unto you He will make him ruler over all that He hath.[9](#)

CHAPTER 20. OF THE LOVE OF SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

Seek a suitable time for thy meditation, and think frequently of the mercies of God to thee. Leave curious questions. Study such matters as bring thee sorrow for sin rather than amusement. If thou withdraw thyself from trifling conversation and idle goings about, as well as from novelties and gossip, thou shalt find thy time sufficient and apt for good meditation. The greatest saints used to avoid as far as they could the company of men, and chose to live in secret with God.

2. One hath said, "As oft as I have gone among men, so oft have I returned less a man." This is what we often experience when we have been long time in conversation. For it is easier to be altogether silent than it is not to exceed in word. It is easier to remain hidden at home than to keep sufficient guard upon thyself out of doors. He, therefore, that seeketh to reach that which is hidden and spiritual, must go with Jesus "apart from the multitude." No man safely goeth abroad who loveth not to rest at home. No man safely talketh but he who loveth to hold his peace. No man safely ruleth but he who loveth to be subject. No man safely commandeth but he who loveth to obey.

3. No man safely rejoiceth but he who hath the testimony of a good conscience within himself. The boldness of the Saints was always full of the fear of God. Nor were they the less earnest and humble in themselves, because they shone forth with great virtues and grace. But the boldness of wicked men springeth from pride and presumption, and at the last turneth to their own confusion. Never promise thyself security in this life, howsoever good a monk or devout a solitary thou seemest.

4. Often those who stand highest in the esteem of men, fall the more grievously because of their over great confidence. Wherefore it is very profitable unto many that they should not be without inward temptation, but should be frequently assaulted, lest they be over confident, lest they be indeed lifted up into pride, or else lean too freely upon the consolations of the world. O how good a conscience should that man keep, who never sought a joy that passeth away, who never became entangled with the world! O how great peace and quiet should he possess, who would cast off all vain care, and think only of healthful and divine things, and build his whole hope upon God!

5. No man is worthy of heavenly consolation but he who hath diligently exercised himself in holy compunction. If thou wilt feel compunction within thy heart, enter into thy chamber and shut out the tumults of the world, as it is written, Commune with your own heart in your own