



THOMAS À KEMPIS

THE IMITATION
OF CHRIST

The Imitation Of Christ

Thomas A Kempis

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Thomas à Kempis - A Biography

By Vincent Scully

Author of the "Imitation of Christ", born at Kempen in the Diocese of Cologne, in 1379 or 1380; died 25 July, 1471.

His parents, John and Gertrude Haemerken, were of the artisan class; it is said that Gertrude kept the village school, and most probably the father worked in metals, a common calling in Kempen, whence perhaps the surname Haemerken, or Haemerlein, Latinized *Malleolus* (a little hammer). We have certain information of only two children, John, the senior by about fourteen years, and Thomas. Thomas was only thirteen when he set out for the schools of Deventer, in Holland. His brother had preceded him thither by ten or twelve years, and doubtless Thomas expected to find him still there. On his arrival, however, he learned that he had gone two years since with five other brothers of the Common Life to lay the foundations of a new congregation of Canons Regular at Windesheim, about

twenty miles from Deventer, where he then went and was lovingly received by his brother who provided him with a letter of introduction to the superior of the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer, Florentius Radewyn. Radewyn gave a warm welcome to the young brother of John Haemerken of Kempen, placed him for the time being in the house and under the maternal care of "a certain noble and devout lady", presented him to the rector of the schools, and paid his first fees, though the master returned the money when he learned whence it came. These particulars we have from the pen of Thomas himself in the biographies, written in his old age, of Gerard Groote, Florentius Radewyn, and their followers (see "The Founders of the New Devotion", London, 1905). For seven years he remained at Deventer, numbered from the first among the disciples of Radewyn, and for a good portion of the time living in his house under his immediate care. It is impossible to exaggerate the influence of those years in the formation of his character. The "new devotion", of which Deventer was then the focus and center, was a revival in the Low Countries in the fourteenth century of the fervour of the primitive Christians at Jerusalem and Antioch in the first. It owed its inception to the fervid preaching of the Deacon Gerard Groote, its further organization to the prudence and generous devotedness of Florentius Radewyn. Its associates were called the "Devout Brothers and Sisters", also the "Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life". They took no vows, but lived a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as far as was compatible with their state, some in their own homes and others, especially clerics, in community. They were forbidden to beg, but all were expected to earn their living by the labour of their hands; for the clerics this meant chiefly the transcribing of books and the instruction of the young. All earnings were placed in a common fund, at the disposal of the superior; the one ambition of all was to emulate the life and virtues of the

first Christians, especially in the love of God and the neighbour, in simplicity, humility, and devotion. Furthermore, partly to provide the Devout Brothers and Sisters with effective protectors and experienced guides, partly to afford an easy transit to the religious state proper for those of their number who should desire it, Gerard Groote conceived the idea of establishing a branch of the canonical order, which should always maintain the closest relations with the members of the new devotion. This scheme was carried into effect after his untimely death, at the early age of forty-three, by the foundation of the congregation of Windesheim, as it was afterwards called from the tract of land where the first priory was established (1386). These details are given as helpful to a better understanding of the life and character of à Kempis, a typical and exemplary Brother, and for seventy-two years he was one of the most distinguished of the Canons Regular.

At Deventer Thomas proved an apt pupil, already noted for his neatness and skill in transcribing manuscripts. This was a life-long labour of love with him; in addition to his own compositions he copied numerous treatises from the Fathers, especially St. Bernard, a Missal for the use of his community, and the whole Bible in four large volumes still extant. After completing his humanities at Deventer, in the autumn of 1399, with the commendation of his superior, Florentius Radewyn, Thomas sought admission among the Canons Regular of Windesheim at Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, of which monastery his brother John was then prior. The house had been established only the previous year, and as yet there was no claustral buildings, no garden, no benefactors, no funds. During his term of office, which lasted nine years, John à Kempis built the priory and commenced the church. In these circumstances we find the explanation of the fact that Thomas was not clothed as a

novice until 1406, at which date the cloister was just completed, nor ordained priest until 1413, the year after the church was consecrated. The point is worth noting, as some writers in their eagerness to discredit the claims of à Kempis to the authorship of the "Imitation" have actually fastened upon the length of this period of probation to insinuate that he was a dullard or worse. Thomas was himself, to within a few months of his death, the chronicler of Agnetenberg. The story which he tells of the earthly struggles of the priory on the mount, its steady progress, and eventual prosperity is full of charm and edification ("The Chronicle of the Canons Regular of Mount St. Agnes", London, 1906). These records reveal to us the simplicity and holiness of his religious brethren. He was twice elected subprior, and once he was made procurator. The reason assigned by an ancient biographer for the latter appointment is one that does honour both to Thomas and his brethren, his love for the poor. However, we can scarcely imagine the author of the "Imitation" a good business manager, and after a time his preference for retirement, literary work, and contemplation prevailed with the Canons to relieve him of the burden. The experience thus gained he made use of in a spiritual treatise, "De fidei dispensatore".

His first tenure of office as subprior was interrupted by the exile of the community from Agnetenberg (1429), occasioned by the unpopular observance of the Canons of Windesheim of an interdict laid upon the country by Martin V. A dispute had arisen in connexion with an appointment to the vacant See of Utrecht and an interdict was upon the land. The Canons remained in exile until the question was settled (1432). The community of Mount St. Agnes had dwelt meanwhile in a canonry of Lunenkerk, which they reformed and affiliated to Windesheim. More than a year of this trying period Thomas spent with his brother John in

the convent of Bethany, near Arnheim, where he had been sent to assist and comfort his brother, who was ailing. He remained until his death (November, 1432). We find record of his election as subprior again in 1448, and doubtless he remained in office until age and infirmity procured him release. It was part of the subprior's duties to train the young religious, and to this fact no doubt we owe most of his minor treatises, in particular his "Sermons to the Novices Regular" (tr. London, 1907). We also know from early biographers that Thomas frequently preached in the church attached to the priory. Two similar series of these sermons are extant (tr. "Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ" and "The Incarnation and Life of Our Lord", London, 1904, 1907). They treat of à Kempis' favourite subjects, the mystery of our Redemption, and the love of Jesus Christ as shown in His words and works, but especially in the sufferings of His Passion. In person Thomas is described as a man of middle height, dark complexion and vivid colouring, with a broad forehead and piercing eyes; kind and affable towards all, especially the sorrowful and the afflicted; constantly engaged in his favourite occupations of reading, writing, or prayer; in time of recreation for the most part silent and recollected, finding it difficult even to express an opinion on matters of mundane interest, but pouring out a ready torrent of eloquence when the conversation turned on God or the concerns of the soul. At such times often he would excuse himself, "My brethren", he would say, "I must go: Someone is waiting to converse with me in my cell." A possibly authentic portrait, preserved at Gertruidenberg, bears as his motto the words: "In omnibus requiem quaesivi et nusquam inveni nisi in een Hoecken met een Boecken" (Everywhere I have sought rest and found it nowhere, save in little nooks with little books). He was laid to rest in the eastern cloister in a spot carefully noted by the continuator of his chronicle. Two centuries after the Reformation,

during which the priory was destroyed, the holy remains were transferred to Zwolle and enclosed in a handsome reliquary by Maximilian Hendrik, Prince-Bishop of Cologne. At present they are enshrined in St. Michael's Church, Zwolle, in a magnificent monument erected in 1897 by subscriptions from all over the world and inscribed: "Honor, non memoriae Thomae Kempensis, cujus nomen perennius quam monumentum" (To the honour not to the memory of Thomas à Kempis, whose name is more enduring than any monument). It is interesting to recall that the same Maximilian Hendrik, who showed such zeal in preserving and honouring the relics of à Kempis, was also eager to see the cause of his beatification introduced and began to collect the necessary documents; but little more than a beginning was made when he died (1688) and since that date no further steps have been taken.

A few words on Thomas' claim, once disputed but now hardly so, to the authorship of the "Imitation of Christ". The book was first issued anonymously (1418) and was soon accorded a wide welcome, copied by different scribes, and attributed to various spiritual writers, among others St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, Henry de Kalkar, Innocent III, Jean Charlier de Gerson, and John à Kempis. In 1441 Thomas completed and signed his name to a codex still extant (Royal Library, Brussels, 5855-61), containing the four books of the "Imitation" and nine minor treatises. Then for two hundred years no serious attempt was made to dispossess à Kempis of his title; but early in the seventeenth century a fierce and prolonged controversy was commenced with the object of establishing the claim of either Jean Charlier de Gerson, Chancellor of Paris, or of his Italian variant, Giovanni Gerson, alleged Benedictine Abbot of Vercelli. At one period an Englishman, Walter Hilton, Canon Regular of Thurgarton, the author of the "Scale (Ladder) of Perfection", was brought forward, but

his claim was not long maintained. Incredible as it may sound, the very existence of Giovanni Gerson of Vercelli is yet to be proved. Of Jean Charlier de Gerson the following facts have been established and they may be found demonstrated at length in such works as Cruise, "Thomas à Kempis", and Kettlewell, "The Authorship of the De Imitatione Christi". Not a single contemporary witness is found in Gerson's favour; not a single manuscript during his life or for thirty years after his death ascribes the work to him; internal evidence, style, matter, etc. are in every respect unfavourable. On the other hand we find the title of à Kempis proved by the following : several contemporary witnesses of unimpeachable authority, including members of his own order, name Thomas as the author; contemporary manuscripts, including one autograph codex, bear his name; internal evidence is wholly favourable. Sir Francis Cruise summarizes this last item under three headings:

- identity of style, including peculiarities common to the "Imitation" and other undisputed works of à Kempis, viz.: barbarisms, Italianized words, Dutch idioms, systematic rhythmical punctuation, and the word *devotus* as used primarily of associates of the new devotion;
- The "Imitation" breathes the whole spirit of the Windesheim school of mysticism;
- it is impregnated throughout with the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers, especially St. Augustine and St. Bernard, all favourite founts of inspiration for à Kempis and his fellow Canons of Windesheim.

The "Imitation" itself, the best known and the first in order of merit of his original writings, comprises in bulk about one-tenth of the works of a Kempis. Many were originally instructions for the novices and junior Canons of whom, as

subprior, Thomas had charge; others are spiritual treatises of wider application and some of these indeed, as the "Oratio de elevatione mentis in Deum", rise to sublime heights of mysticism. There are numerous prayers of sweet devotion and quaint Latin hymns of simple rhythm and jingling rhyme. One work, of which Thomas was editor rather than author, is a "Life of (St.) Lydwine, Virgin". The best complete edition so far of the "Opera Omnia" of à Kempis is that of the Jesuit Somalius, published by Nut of Antwerp, 1607; even this does not contain the "Chronicon Montis Sanctae Agnetis", which was edited by H. Rosweyd, S.J., and published in one volume with the "Chronicon Windesemense" (Antwerp, 1621). Of the innumerable editions of the "Imitation", doubtless by far the most interesting is a facsimile from the 1441 codex, published in London, 1879. A splendid critical edition of the "Opera Omnia" was published by Herder under the able editorship of Dr. Pohl early in the twentieth century. Perhaps in this connexion we may quote the enthusiastic commendation of Prior Pirkhamer addressed to Peter Danhausser, the publisher of the first edition of Thomas à Kempis' works, 1494: "Nothing more holy, nothing more honourable, nothing more religious, nothing in fine more profitable for the Christian commonweal can you ever do than to make known these works of Thomas à Kempis."

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 IMITATION OF CHRIST

THE FIRST BOOK

ADMONITIONS PROFITABLE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

CHAPTER I

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.

(1) John viii. 12. (2) Revelations ii. 17. (3) Ecclesiastes i. 8.

CHAPTER II

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 III

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.(1) 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 reproved 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.(2) 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.

(1) Psalm xciv. 12; Numbers xii. 8. (2) John viii. 25 (Vulg.).

CHAPTER IV

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 V

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.