

The Influence of "Imitatione Christi."

IT has been said that every great book makes us want to know something about the man who wrote it, and Thomas à Kempis, the author of *Imitatione Christi*, has had far more books written about him than he ever wrote himself. His claim to be the author of such a famous Manual of Devotion was, until recently, in dispute, so that most of the books written about him are of a purely controversial nature. Its authorship has been assigned at various times to such spiritual writers as St. Bernard, St. Bonaventura, and Walter Hilton; but the claim of Thomas à Kempis appears to have been completely vindicated in recent years.

Apart from this controversial literature, which is not really concerned with the man himself, enough authentic material is available to give us an impression of his long, secluded life. If anybody's life was uneventful, in the ordinary sense of the word, that of Thomas à Kempis certainly was. But there was at the same time what can only be called an *atmosphere* about it, and that atmosphere has found its way inevitably into his *Imitatione Christi*, so that we seem to detect it, like some prevailing fragrance, on every page and in every word. The man is the book; the book is the man. In imagination we see him writing it:

"... his little book
in his little nook."

The man whose book was to be read more widely than any other spiritual work, with the sole exception of the Bible itself, was born about the year 1380 at Kempen, in the diocese of Cologne. His parents were of the artisan class. At the age of twelve he was sent to the School of Deventer, in Holland, and became the disciple of Florentius Radewin. He remained under the spiritual guidance of that beloved master for the next seven years. This Florentius, whose life and character were afterwards limned with glowing affection by his illustrious disciple, was responsible for the shaping of the heart and mind of Thomas à Kempis. To his inspired teaching the world probably owes the creation of *Imitatione Christi*. "Florentius taught his disciples," wrote Thomas à Kempis, "to humble themselves, to know well their own weakness . . . to prefer themselves to no man, and having made their foundation sure by lowliness, at length, by the

indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit, to climb to the height of clear knowledge and the light of that full vision of God which is promised to the pure in heart." Florentius was known as "the most pitiful father of the poor"; and after tasting his amazing charity, which included a bath "in warm water infused with aromatic herbs, a most cleanly bed, food and a cup of wine," the destitute would say to one another: "How good and loving a man is this friend Florentius!" It would be impossible to exaggerate the influence of such a master on the future author of *Imitatione Christi*.

In 1399 Thomas left Deventer and proceeded to Windesheim, near Zwolle, where he begged admission to the Monastery of St. Agnes as a canon-regular. His elder brother, John, was Prior there at the time, so it is not surprising that Thomas "was mercifully received." The chronicler, Rosweyde, describes Thomas as being "rather below the middle height, well proportioned, of a dark complexion, but with a bright, fresh colour and remarkably keen eyes." He had a noble head with a high, broad forehead, and the eyes of one whose inward vision has long been fixed on things eternal.

With one or two short breaks, à Kempis was to spend seventy-two years as a canon-regular in the Monastery of St. Agnes. He was ordained in 1413, and died in 1471. All his biographers agree that from the moment he became a canon-regular, Thomas was a "model of that loving piety which changes the hell of this world into a veritable paradise." Everything he did and said and wrote savoured of Christian virtue. Towards his brethren he was sweetness itself; and he was charitable and full of sympathy for all. The community he joined could not have been more ideally suited to the spiritual aspirations of the young à Kempis. St. Agnes had been formally established as a Monastery only a short time before his arrival, and its members were all filled with a religious zeal for spiritual devotions. Prior John, brother of Thomas, caused the devotions to be observed with great regularity and fervour. As the old chronicler of Windesheim expressed it: "The brethren could claim to be green and flourishing shoots of so great a tree of God's planting." In common with most of his kind in those far-off Pre-Reformation times, Thomas became an expert copyist of precious manuscripts, and side by side with his other monasterial duties, his chief occupation was the transcribing of the Holy Scriptures and works of devotion.

After his ordination he held the office of sub-prior, attached to which was the duty of instructing the novices. These joint offices he appears to have filled for a long period of years. Once he was made procurator, being chosen for that office because

his brethren saw that he was "much inclined to give alms." He died at the ripe old age of ninety-one. Attempts have been made at various times to introduce the cause of his beatification, but nothing has ever come of them. His writings, and especially *Imitatione Christi*, are a lasting testimony to his deeply spiritual character.

Besides his masterpiece, Thomas à Kempis was the author of several other books, which though less popular in their appeal, breathe the same spirit of love, humility, and intimate communion with God. He also compiled chronicles of other religious orders. Most of these works have been translated into English and will repay devout reading. All are rich in Biblical allusions, so that the impression one gets from them is that Thomas must have had a profound knowledge of the Bible. The fact that he was at all times a prodigious worker is also evident; in addition, he must either have had a phenomenally retentive mind, or been in the habit of taking copious notes from everything he read or copied out. In fact, it is only reasonable to guess that any intelligent and deeply interested copyist, such as Thomas undoubtedly was, would jot down for his own personal use anything that particularly appealed to his piety and made a bid for his mind. Such references, amassed through the silent years, and probably set down in some private commonplace book, would be invaluable when the copyist turned himself to the task of writing or instruction.

A striking feature of à Kempis's *Imitatione Christi* is the early date of its appearance. It was first published, anonymously, in 1418, when Thomas was only thirty-eight. As it stands, the book might conceivably represent the accumulated spiritual wisdom of a lifetime. Yet a comparatively young fellow, shut away from the world of men and women, was able to produce a work so mature in thought and observation, so rich in the range of its spiritual experience, yet at the same time so homespun and simple, that it won immediate acceptance as a spiritual classic.

The *Imitatione Christi* is divided into four books, which contain admonitions, exhortations, and counsels of incalculable value on various aspects of Christian life and doctrine. The fourth book, which contains eighteen chapters, treats especially of the Lord's Supper, and is headed *A Devout Exhortation to Holy Communion*. In some of the editions of *Imitatione Christi* this book is so arranged as to provide a different form of preparation and thanksgiving for each visit to the Lord's Table. But any average reader should be able to do that for himself. It would be difficult indeed to discover material more suitable and appropriate than this for communion preparation. Weekly or fortnightly communicants, who sometimes experience aridity

due to custom or routine, will find a fresh fervour in reading over a chapter of this fourth book of the *Imitatione* before coming to the Lord's Table.

Much more difficult must have been the task of the compilers to find a descriptive and comprehensive title for each of the other three books. The first, comprising twenty-five chapters, offers useful admonitions for a spiritual life. The vanities of the world, the flesh, and the devil are to be despised, and a "meek knowledge of oneself" is to be had by listening to the words of divine Truth. A warning is given against "flying vain hope and pride," "inordinate affections," while much stress is put upon the "profit of adversity," "the love of silence," "obtaining peace," "the merit of resisting temptations and avoiding rash judgments," "the consideration of human misery," and, last of all, the absolute necessity of ever remembering the "last things."

The second book, in twelve chapters, is concerned with the "inner life." Peace is to be had only from a pure mind, a "simple intent," and a "good conscience." "The glory of a good man," the monk of the Middle Ages wrote, "is the *testimony of a good conscience*. Have a good conscience, and thou shalt ever have joy. A good conscience is able to bear very much, and is very joyful in adversities. An evil conscience is always fearful and unquiet. Thou shalt rest sweetly, if thy heart do not blame thee. Never rejoice, but when thou hast done well. Sinners have never true joy, nor feel inward peace; because *there is no peace to the wicked, saith the Lord*. And if they should say, *We are in peace, no evil shall fall upon us, and who shall dare to hurt us?* believe them not; for upon a sudden will arise the wrath of God, and their deeds shall be turned into nothing, and their thoughts shall perish. To *glory in tribulation*, is not a hard thing for him that loveth; for so to glory is to glory in the Cross of the Lord. Brief is that glory which is given and received from men. Sorrow always accompanieth the glory of the world." All human solace and comfort may be wanting to a man, but he can turn to the "love of Jesus above all things," and in the fond familiarity of His friendship find inward strength and consolation. Few are the lovers of the Cross; yet only those who embrace it will find lasting peace.

In fifty-nine chapters the third book deals with a vast variety of topics, but the general idea throughout is that man must draw near to God by faith and love, patience and meekness. The closer a man approaches his Maker, so much the more readily will he forsake himself, "eschew vain secular cunning," and "set the world at nought." But to do all this he must have a "free mind" and avoid curiosity, "not regard much outward things," "not account himself worthy of comfort, but rather deserving

of stripes," "ponder but little the judgment of men," and remember "that God is sweet above all things and in all things to him that loveth."

The *Imitatione Christi*, in spite of its unfortunate title, has been translated into almost every language. Christian and non-Christian, Protestant and Roman Catholic, men of thought and men of action, tormented souls and souls at peace with themselves, old and young, men and women, and Orientals and Occidentals alike have sung its praise. A certain king of Morocco is said to have made it his constant companion.

The ship, bringing the redoubtable John Newton back from his *sturm und drang* period in Africa, had crossed to Brazil, then held straight northward from the banks of Newfoundland on its homeward voyage. It was badly out of gear, and the Spring equinoctial gales were blowing hard. Little could be done in navigating the vessel, and, to pass the time, Newton picked up one of the very few books which chanced to be on board. Of all the books in the world this was a copy of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatione Christi*, and as he read the quiet, beautiful sentences of the old cloistered saint, the thought came into his mind, "What if these things should be true?" He shut the book hastily, climbed into his hammock, and fell fast asleep. "But now," as he says, "the Lord's time was come." On the morning of the March 10th, 1748, he was awakened by the sound of heavy seas breaking on the deck. A fearful tempest had fallen on the ship, and for four days it raged with uninterrupted fury. The vessel was waterlogged, and became partly a wreck, and several of the crew were washed overboard. Newton himself was lashed to the pumps, and toiled like a Trojan for hours together as the vessel drifted helplessly eastward. All hope was abandoned. Then, through his reading of the *Imitatione*, old, half-forgotten, often-derided words of the Bible came to his memory, especially, as he tells us himself, words of judgment. Scene after scene of his licentious life rose up before him. The storm lulled a little and then he began to pray. "My prayer was like the cry of the ravens, which yet the Lord does not disdain to hear." This was the turning-point in Newton's life. Henceforth he never failed to keep the March 10th in solemn remembrance, nor ceased to give grateful thanks to God for *Imitatione Christi*.

In the fifteenth colloquy, *The Library, of Sir Thomas More : or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, by Robert Southey, we happen on this fine passage :—

"... To the studies which I have faithfully pursued, I am indebted for friends with whom, hereafter, it will be deemed an honour to have lived in friendship; and as for

the enemies which they have procured to me in sufficient numbers . . . happily I am not of the thin-skinned race . . . they might as well fire small shot at a rhinoceros, as direct their attacks upon me. *In omnibus requiem quaesivi*, said Thomas à Kempis, *sed non inveni nisi in angulis et libellis*. I too have found repose where he did, in books and retirement, but it was there alone I sought it: to these my nature, under the direction of a merciful Providence, led me betimes, and the world can offer nothing which should tempt me from them."

Largely responsible for his famous Oxford awakening, John Wesley was so impressed and helped by his reading of the *Imitation* that he set himself to the task of translating it into his mother-tongue. Later in life he expressed the judgment that it was "next to the Bible." His initial reading of it worked deeply upon his sensitive spirit and wrought a marked change in his life. "I began," he says, "to alter the whole of my conversation; and to set out in earnest upon a new life. I set apart an hour or two each day for religious retirement; I communicated every week; I watched against all sin, whether in word or in deed."

Patience and resignation were the states of the purified soul which Florence Nightingale found, curiously enough, hardest of attainment. Her tribulations were often caused, she complained, by her impatience. "O Lord, even now," she once prayed, "I am trying to snatch the management of Thy world out of Thy hands." She marked for her edification many a passage from devotional writers in which such virtues were enjoined, as in this from Thomas à Kempis: "Oh Lord my God, patience is very necessary for me, for I perceive that many things in this life do fall out as we would not . . . It is so, my son. But my will is that thou seek not peace which is void of temptations, or which suffereth nothing contrary; but rather think that thou hast found in many adversities."

peace, when thou art exercised with sundry tribulations and tried

On a lovely blue day in summer, during his Southampton ministry, Alexander McLaren came upon the Westlake sisters in the New Forest. One of them was reading, and he accosted her, "Will it bear the test of these surroundings?" She replied, "It is Thomas à Kempis." "Ah! that will do," he said.

"Turn to the heights," exclaims Thomas à Kempis, "turn to the deeps, turn within, turn without—everywhere thou shalt find the Cross!" Those who know George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* will remember the passage in which it is told how little Maggie Tulliver stumbled upon this tremendous truth. She had

come home from school to a humdrum life with little love in it either from parents or brother. She became discontented and felt home to be a sort of prison. Was there not some secret of life to be gathered from books, she wondered? Trying one book after another she came upon a copy of à Kempis's *Imitatione Christi*, "It had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand now for ever quiet had made at certain passages strong pen and ink marks, long since browned by time. She turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed: "Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world. If thou seekest this or that, and would be here or there to enjoy thy own will or pleasure, thou shalt never be quite free from care. . . ."

"She read on and on in the old book, devouring eagerly the dialogues with the invisible Teacher, the pattern of sorrow, the source of all strength; returning to it after she had been called away, and reading till the sun went down behind the willows. With all the hurry of an imagination that could never rest in the present, she sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness; and, in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain. She had not perceived—how could she until she had lived longer?—the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow born willingly. Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it. She knew nothing of doctrines and systems—of mysticism or quietism; but this voice out of the far-off middle ages was the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message.

I suppose that is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a book-stall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness; while expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued, leave all things as they were before. It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust and triumph—not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations: the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced—in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head, with much

chanting and long fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours—but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness.”

But it still remains impossible to analyse the precise quality that makes the *Imitatione* different from every other spiritual book, and is the perennial secret of its universal appeal. It possesses that elusive, indefinable “something” which captivates the wayward heart of man. Charm the book has, fresh and unstudied, a winning naiveté of expression, a style spontaneous and unconventional. It is perhaps the supreme example of the “art that conceals art.” His life, as we have already seen, was outwardly the most uneventful conceivable; but few have understood, as Thomas did, the language of simple, mystical devotion to Christ.

Thomas à Kempis was by no means the author of one book, but his *Imitatione Christi* could very well be made the one spiritual book of any devout soul. What it has to say should be read slowly and with recollection; there is a choice of subject in it to meet every spiritual need and mood. A regular habit of reading the *Imitatione* can have but one happy result: the enriching and enlarging of one’s spiritual life.

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