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## “De Imitatione Christi.”

A Review of “The Imitation of Christ,” by Thomas à Kempis,\* with an Historical Introduction on Scholasticism, Mysticism, and the Brethren of the Common Life.

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Of the book *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, Kurtz, the church historian, says: “With the exception of the Bible perhaps no other work has so frequently been reprinted or translated into so many languages, nor has any other been perused by so many persons of all ranks and creeds.” Up to the year 1900 three thousand editions had been printed. The printing of a new edition a few months ago by the Macmillan Company — this edition bearing the *nihil obstat* and the *imprimatur* of Roman Catholic censorship — has given the incentive to this article. It seems strange that a religious book having the approval of the Roman Catholic Church has been widely circulated among, and studiously read also by, a large number of Protestants.

Thomas à Kempis was a member of the Brethren of the Common Life. As soon as we know the relation of this order to Mysticism and the relation of Mysticism to Scholasticism, we shall know the reason why Thomas à Kempis wrote his book *De Imitatione Christi* and shall understand the religious element in it which has merited the approval of the Roman Catholic Church and which also, from a somewhat different viewpoint, has appealed to a large number of Protestants. A few introductory historical notes will therefore help us in our judgment.

Scholasticism was an attempt made during the Middle Ages, from Anselm to Aquinas, to rationalize Christianity or, in other words, to justify the existing church doctrines by reason, especially by the reasoning process of Aristotelian philosophy. The method

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\* *The Imitation of Christ*. By Thomas à Kempis. Edited with introduction and notes by Brother Leo, F. C. S., Professor of English Literature in St. Mary's College, Oakland, Cal. 353 pages. \$1.00. (The Macmillan Company, New York, N. Y.)

was something like this: the *material* was furnished by the sentences of the Church Fathers, the dogmas, the canons of the councils, the decrees of Popes, etc.; the *conclusion* was confirmed by quotations from the Fathers, *Aristotle*, and the Bible, the Bible being subordinated to the other two. Scholasticism was rationalism. The fact that some Scholastics, such as Anselm, put faith first and then reason (*non intelligo ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam*), and that others, like Abelard, put reason first and then faith (*non credendum, nisi prius intellectum*), finally led to the same result. All applied the same rule to the reading of the Bible which Abelard, in his book *Sic et Non*, desired to have applied to the reading of the Church Fathers, namely, that they should not be read *cum credendi necessitate, sed cum judicandi libertate, i. e., critically*.

Rationalists never have agreed. Of course not; for if the human mind is to decide what is to be believed, then there will be as many different religious systems as there are different minds. Neither did the rationalistic Scholastics of the Middle Ages agree. The somewhat Biblical doctrine of the atonement taught by Anselm in his book *Cur Deus Homo?* was rejected by Abelard's *moral influence theory* of the atonement, for Abelard denied the vicarious atonement and taught that the incarnation and death of Christ are the highest expression of God's love to the sinner, which, in turn, should have the effect of awakening love to God in man. And this doctrine differed again from that of Duns Scotus, who taught the so-called *acceptilation theory*, teaching that Christ rendered only partial payment, but that God accepted this partial payment as an equivalent of the entire debt which the sinner owes God. The teachings of Scholasticism were finally crystallized by Thomas Aquinas into a definite system, which became the approved doctrinal system of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages and, in all its essentials, is still its dogmatic system to-day. In this system two things which exclude each other, namely, grace and merit, are the two dominating conceptions and are, without reconciliation, permitted to stand side by side.

This rationalistic theology of the Middle Ages could not create a virile Christianity, no more than rationalistic systems of theology could do so at any time in the history of the Church, from those of the ancient period of church history down to those of the modern theology of the present time. Whenever the apparent failure of such a rationalistic system made itself sorely felt, a *reaction* followed. Mysticism was such a reaction against Scholasticism.

When things went from bad to worse in the Church and it was found that there was largely only a mere outward formalism, while the real inward piety of the heart was neglected, the Mystics sought to reestablish the latter. Their method of doing so, however, was wrong, because, after all, they sought in their way to bring about a regeneration of the human heart without understanding that the justification of the sinner by God through Christ must be the basis of such a regeneration. Mysticism put feeling above knowledge; it was given to mental introversion and neglected the written revelation; it stressed holiness of life, but failed to show its source and therefore directed man to his own works for his salvation; it spoke of Jesus *in us*, but little of Jesus *for us*. After all, Mysticism did not entirely break away from Scholasticism and from the Roman Catholic theology of the Middle Ages. An effort was made to reform the life of man without establishing for such reformation the proper basis, namely, that man be set right with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

As a result of Mysticism — its flourishing period was from 1400 to 1500 — such societies were formed as "The Brethren of the Common Life." These "brethren" lived essentially a monastic life, without, however, taking the monastic vows. Some of the brethren devoted themselves to preaching, visiting the sick, copying and circulating books, and educating the youth, while others were employed in manual labor and in the mechanical arts. Thomas à Kempis was a member of the order of the Brethren of the Common Life. He was born in 1379, a son of John Haemmerken (little hammer), in the town of Kempen. Later Thomas Haemmerken of Kempen was only known as Thomas à Kempis (Thomas of the town of Kempen). In 1399 Thomas entered the monastery of Mount St. Agnes near Zwolle, where he spent seventy-one years of his life, knowing "no world but that within the monastery walls." The best-known work of Thomas à Kempis is his *De Imitatione Christi*. It has four chapters: Admonitions Useful for a Spiritual Life, Admonitions Concerning the Interior Life, Concerning the Holy Communion, Of Interior Consolation.

In the new edition, which just left the press a few months ago, the editor says: "The earliest English version was made by Wylliam Atkynson and printed by Wykyns de Worde in 1502. A translation of notable interest is that by Edward Hake, which appeared in 1567. Of the numerous English versions appearing in recent years many are defective owing to the unpardonable omission of the Third Book and the merciless mutilation of the text. Among

the best English editions are those of Sir Francis Cruise, Canon Benham, Bishop Challoner, and the Oxford edition of 1841."

We have carefully examined the present edition, but have not compared it with the original. From a literary point of view the translation by Brother Leo makes good English reading. In the preface he says: "This edition of *The Imitation of Christ* has been prepared from an educational rather than a devotional viewpoint. The text is the result of research, analysis, comparison, and reflection and has been adapted with a view to its use in high school and academic classes. The aim of the editor has been to suggest an archaic flavor in the style, without, at the same time, making too great a demand on the reading vocabulary of the students."

In the introduction, covering about forty pages, Brother Leo has a chapter on the "sources" from which à Kempis took his material. From this introduction we quote the following: "Study *The Imitation*," writes Sir Francis Cruise, "and it is impossible not to realize that, first of all and above all, it is saturated throughout with the Sacred Scriptures. No one can read many sentences in it which do not recall passages in the Old and the New Testament. It reflects them as a mirror, applying them with unmatched deftness to meet the wants and soul-yearnings of poor humanity. Be the quotations direct or paraphrastic, there they are at every step. All this is evident to those who know the Bible well." According to Dr. Pohl, unquestionably the most distinguished Kempist scholar of our time, *The Imitation* contains more than eleven hundred quotations from the Bible, most of them being taken bodily from the Latin Vulgate. In many cases, however, Thomas à Kempis embodies the quotation in a brief explanation of its meaning, in the form of a paraphrase. . . . It is questionable if he read Greek, but at all events he must have happened upon Aristotle either in the original or in a Latin translation, for *The Imitation* shows unmistakably the influence of the Greek philosopher upon whose method of thought the Schoolmen raised the imposing structure of scholastic philosophy. . . . Besides being a devout and sedulous student of the Holy Scriptures, Thomas à Kempis was an assiduous reader of the Fathers of the Christian Church, whose writings were rated among the most precious of the manuscripts treasured in the Mount St. Agnes Monastery. Scholars have found in *The Imitation* passages that indicate the influence of St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, St. Bonaventura, and St. Thomas Aquinas, the most noted exponent of the scholastic philosophy. The influence of the last-named writer deserves special emphasis. An

opinion current among many critics is that à Kempis wrote *The Imitation* in a mood of revolt against the philosophy of the Schoolmen, and that he shows but scanty regard for the much-misunderstood system of thought. While it is undeniably true that à Kempis, with the impatience born of directness and practicality of mind, had little regard for what was ultraformal and recondite in the scholastic system, he nevertheless recognized in the theology of the Angelic Doctor, as Thomas of Aquin was called, the most consistent presentation of the rational basis of Catholic dogma and morals. While the author of *The Imitation*, intent upon conversion of the heart and growth in holiness, cried out, ‘What have we to do with genera and species?’ he does not fail, when occasion arises, to pay to the scholastic system the tribute of his esteem. The backbone of the Third Book, as has been frequently pointed out, is the system of St. Thomas. *The Imitation of Christ* does not, then, stand for a reaction against the philosophy of the Schoolmen; it is from one point of view a protest against the wasteful and ridiculous excess of controversy and discussion to which that system of thought was carried by many of its fourteenth century devotees. A’ Kempis, it must be remembered, was pre-eminently of a practical turn of mind, and he had a pious horror of the fine-spun and purely theoretical and speculative arguments which characterized Scholasticism in certain of its ramifications.”

A few samples of *The Imitation of Christ*, taken from the English translation by Brother Leo, are herewith given:—

**“Of the Imitation of Christ and Contempt of All Worldly Vanities.**

“1. He that followeth Me walketh not in darkness, saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are taught to imitate His life and manners if we would be truly enlightened and be delivered from all blindness of heart. Let therefore our chief study be to meditate upon the life of Jesus Christ.

“2. The doctrine of Christ surpasseth all the doctrines of holy men, and he that hath His Spirit will find therein a hidden manna.

“But many, albeit they often hear the Gospel of Christ, are yet but little affected because they have not the Spirit of Christ.

“Whosoever, then, would fully and feelingly understand the words of Christ must endeavor to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ.

“3. What will it avail thee to be engaged in profound discussions concerning the Trinity if thou be void of humility and art thereby displeasing to the Trinity?

“Truly, sublime words do not make a man holy and just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God.

“I had rather feel compunction than know how to define it.

“If thou knewest the whole Bible by heart and the sayings of all

the philosophers, what would it profit thee without the love of God and without grace?

"Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity, except to love God and Him only to serve.

"This is the highest wisdom, by contempt of the world to tend towards the kingdom of heaven.

"4. It is therefore vanity to seek after perishable riches and to trust in them.

"It is also vanity to strive after honors and to climb to high degree.

"It is vanity to follow the lusts of the flesh and to desire that for which thou must afterwards suffer grievous punishment.

"It is vanity to wish to live long and not to care to live well.

"It is vanity to mind only this present life and not to make provision for those things which are to come.

"It is vanity to love that which speedily passeth away, and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy abideth.

"5. Call often to mind that proverb: The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing.

"Endeavor therefore to withdraw thy heart from the love of visible things and to turn thyself to the invisible.

"For they that follow their evil passions stain their own consciences and lose the grace of God." (Book One, chapter I.)

In this chapter Thomas asks that men follow Christ, but he fails to tell them *how* they may be able to do so. He stresses sanctification without directing the sinner to the doctrine of justification. *This is characteristic of the entire book.*

In his *meditation on death* we ought certainly to expect to find that Thomas tells the sinner to prepare to meet his God by accepting in true childlike faith the forgiveness of sins which is in Christ Jesus. But we find nothing of the kind. Instead, Thomas gives this direction: "A perfect contempt of the world, a fervent desire to go forward in all virtue, a love of discipline, a laborious repentance, a ready obedience, a denying of ourselves, and an endurance of any affliction whatsoever for the love of God will give us great confidence that we shall die happily." The sinner is directed to his own works, and not to Christ, the Savior, whose blood cleanses us from all sin.

Another sample:—

"Of the Oblation of Christ on the Cross and of Self-Resignation.

"THE VOICE OF THE BELOVED.

"1. Of My own will did I offer up Myself unto God the Father for thy sins. My hands were stretched forth on the cross and My body laid bare, so that nothing remained in Me that was not wholly turned into a sacrifice for the appeasing of the divine Majesty.

"In like manner oughtest thou also to offer thyself willingly unto Me

daily in the Mass as a pure and holy oblation, with all thy strength and affections, as intimately as thou canst.

“What do I require of thee more than that thou study to resign thyself entirely to Me?

“Whatsoever thou givest besides thyself is of no value in My sight, for I seek not thy gifts, but thee.

“2. As it would not suffice thee to have all things whatsoever without Me, so neither can it please Me whatsoever thou givest, if thou give not thyself.

“Offer up thyself unto Me and give thyself wholly to God, and thine offering shall be acceptable.

“Behold, I offered up Myself wholly unto My Father for thee and gave My whole body and blood for thy food that I might be wholly thine and that thou mightest continue Mine to the end.

“But if thou abide in self and do not offer thyself up freely unto My will, thine oblation is not entire, and there will be no perfect union between us.

“Therefore a free offering of thyself unto the hands of God ought to go before all thine actions if thou desire to obtain liberty and grace.

“For this cause so few become inwardly free and enlightened, because they are loath wholly to deny themselves.

“My sentence standeth sure: Unless a man renounce all, he cannot be My disciple. If thou therefore desire to be My disciple, offer up thyself unto Me with thy whole heart.” (Book Three, chapter VIII.)

In the opening words of this chapter Thomas says that Christ offered Himself for the sins of the world, but he then fails to give the sinner the comfort that by faith this offering of Christ is made the sinner's own; he rather directs the sinner to seek God's favor by offering himself daily in the Mass and by wholly denying himself. While it is true that the Christian should practise self-denial and present his body as a living sacrifice to God, yet this can be done only *as a result of faith*; and it should be done *for the purpose of giving evidence of his faith and not for the purpose of thereby meriting his salvation*.

Another sample from Book Two, chapter VIII:—

#### Familiar Friendship with Jesus!

“What can the world profit thee without Jesus?

“To be without Jesus is a grievous hell; to be with Jesus, a sweet paradise.

“If Jesus be with thee, no enemy shall be able to hurt thee.

“He that findeth Jesus findeth a good treasure, yea, a good above all good.

“And he that loseth Jesus loseth overmuch, yea, more than the whole world.

“Most poor is he who liveth without Jesus; and he is most rich who is dear to Jesus.

"It asketh great skill to know how to hold converse with Jesus, and to know how to keep Jesus is great wisdom.

"Be thou humble and peaceable, and Jesus will be with thee.

"Be devout and quiet, and Jesus will stay with thee.

"Thou mayest soon drive away Jesus and lose His favor if thou wilt turn aside to outward things.

"And if thou shouldst drive Him from thee and lose Him, unto whom wilt thou flee, and whom wilt thou then seek for thy friend?

"Without a friend thou canst not well live; and if Jesus be not above all friends to thee, thou shalt be indeed sad and desolate.

"Therefore thou doest not wisely if thou trust or rejoice in any other.

"It is preferable to have all the world against thee rather than to have Jesus offended with thee.

"Amongst all that be dear unto thee let Jesus alone be specially beloved."

While all that is said in these words is true, yet neither before nor after does Thomas clearly state *how the sinner can come to Jesus*. Such clear Bible statements as the following are not found anywhere in *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis: "By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast," Eph. 2, 8, and: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him," John 3, 36. Thomas à Kempis was under the influence of the theology of his time, namely, that of Thomas Aquinas and of the Roman Catholic Church, and that theology did not emphasize salvation by the free grace of God through Christ the Savior, but obscured such salvation by directing the sinner to his own good works. Thomas à Kempis speaks much of Christ as our Example, but only in a passing way — and that not very often — of Christ who died for us.

Why has *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis appealed to so many Protestants and found a wide circulation among them? We answer: —

First: Because the references to specific Roman Catholic doctrines, such as the Mass, purgatory, calling upon the saints, etc., is not made an outstanding feature of the book, and therefore the average Protestant reader does not readily recognize that the book has been, after all, written from a Roman Catholic viewpoint.

Secondly: The book is filled with many Bible references, which, of course, appeal to the Christian.

Thirdly: Many of the sayings of Thomas à Kempis are true in themselves and could well stand if the proper basis for them were not missing, or, expressed in other words, if they had been



put in proper relation to the central doctrine of the Christian religion — justification by faith.

Fourthly: The sincerity and the singleness of heart of the author is so apparent that one is inclined to give him more credit than he deserves.

Fifthly: The admonitions to a holy life always appeal to the Christian.

Sixthly: There is no doubt that many Protestant readers will, by presupposing it, supply what is missing in the book and therefore understand what they read in the light of their own better Christian knowledge.

After all, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis makes man's own piety, and not the grace of God in Christ Jesus, the determining factor in man's salvation. From Thomas à Kempis one cannot learn the true conception of Biblical Christianity.

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