

# THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. V.

APRIL, 1925.

No. 4.

## “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.

JOHN H. C. FRITZ, St. Louis, Mo.

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

---

\* *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.)

---

# St. John's Church in Catawba Co., N. C., One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years Old.

CARROLL O. SMITH, Conover, N. C.

---

## I. Its Founding.

It may be a surprise to many of the members of the Missouri Synod to know that we have within our Synod at least one congregation which is almost fifty years older than Synod itself. The congregation which bears this distinction is situated in Catawba County, N. C., about three miles from Conover, the home of our Concordia College of the Southeast. It is St. John's congregation, which celebrated its one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary on the first Sunday in June of last year.

Unfortunately the records of the founding and of the early activities of this congregation have been lost, if, indeed, any were systematically kept. The only record that has escaped the ravages of time is the deed for the land, about six acres, upon which the church stands. This deed was executed in 1799 by one Henry "Bobe" (Pope), who had obtained the land by king's patent from Governor William Tryon, who became Governor of North Carolina April 3, 1765. What more we know, or think we know, about the early life of this congregation has been learned by a study of secular and Lutheran history of North Carolina, supplemented by local tradition.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY LIBRARY  
FIELD, ILLINOIS

Some of the crude inscriptions on the roughly polished stones standing at the earlier graves in the cemetery on the west side of the church are in the German language. The first records of the North Carolina Synod, the first synod to which this congregation belonged, were made in the same language. Perhaps at the time of the formation of the North Carolina Synod the pastors of St. John's used the German language exclusively. Some few descendants of old families who were members of St. John's still speak a few words or even sentences of German; and they remember that their fathers and mothers and the old people who came to visit them spoke German — in some instances better than they spoke English. But when we begin to investigate, we find that the German spoken by these people was the so-called Pennsylvania German, although the early proceedings of the North Carolina Synod and, later, of the Tennessee Synod were recorded in High German.

Therefore, in order to get more information about the formation and organization of this congregation, we shall have to turn to the early German immigrants who settled in the "province" of North Carolina — immigrating from Pennsylvania, for the most part, to this western, or Piedmont, section of the State.

According to history, "the first German that set foot upon the soil of Carolina was John Lederer, who was sent on three different expeditions by Sir William Berkeley, Governor of the Colony of Virginia, to explore lands lying south and west of the James River, during the years of 1669 and 1670." His journal, written in Latin, and the map of his explorations, displaying a knowledge of geographical calculations which must be called remarkable when we consider the disadvantages of those times and the difficulties under which he had to labor, proclaim Lederer to have been a man of learning. According to his journal, Lederer started on his last trip of exploration on "the 20th of May, 1670," accompanied by "one Major Harris . . . with twenty Christian horse and five Indians." After some months of wandering through trackless forests and rugged mountains, Major Harris and the "twenty Christian horse" decided to go back home. Lederer went on alone. After having crossed the State of North Carolina and penetrated into the State of South Carolina and after having had several narrow escapes at the hands of the Indians, he finally returned to Virginia to find himself out of favor with Governor Berkeley on account of the activities of Major Harris, who had represented to the people "that the public taxes of that year had

all been expended in his wanderings." He was insulted and reproached in such a manner in Virginia that he finally went to New Jersey. The governor, Sir William Talbert, although at first prejudiced against him, gave him a respectful hearing, translated his journal from Latin into English, and published it. This journal at once began to tell its story to the people of Maryland, and soon it crossed into Pennsylvania to tell the same story to many Germans living there.

Ten years later, in 1680, the stream of German emigration from Pennsylvania began to flow. Land could not be obtained in Pennsylvania without much difficulty; for the proprietors of that province purchased the soil by small parcels from the natives, and those lands were soon taken up." (Williamson's *Hist. of N. C.*, Vol. II, p. 71.) On the other hand, the same authority informs us that "Lord Carteret's land in Carolina, where the soil was cheap, presented a tempting residence to people of every denomination." Consequently, many of the Germans of Pennsylvania, having piled into their capacious wagons every possible article for house and farm use, set out for this "Province of North Carolina." By way of the Cumberland and Shenandoah valleys, over the Blue Ridge Mountains, through almost trackless forests, across unbridged streams, by easy stages, they moved on toward the land of promise, with women and children riding in the wagons on top of bedding and men walking and driving cows, sheep, and hogs before them. They usually "left home in the fall season, after all the harvesting was over and the proceeds of the year's labor could be disposed of; they arrived at their places of settlement just before the commencement of the winter season. The first arrival of the pioneer train may have occurred about the year 1745, but the large body of these German colonists did not commence to settle in North Carolina until about the year 1750; this may be gathered partly from tradition, partly from old family records in their German Bibles, but mostly from the title-deeds of their lands." (Bernheim, *German Settlements and the Lutheran Church in the Carolinas*, p. 153.) "As they were all agriculturists, they generally avoided settling themselves in towns; uninformed in the ways of the world, ignorant of the English language, and unacquainted with the shrewdness necessary for merchandising, yet well informed in their own language and well read in their Bibles and other devotional German books, they remained at their country homes . . . ; hence very few Lutheran and German Reformed churches were erected in the towns of North

Carolina at that early day; and when, in process of time, it did become necessary to build churches in the villages and towns of the State, it was found exceedingly difficult to get the members from the country to become accustomed to the new arrangement." (*L. c.*, p. 153 f.)

Owing to the fact that these colonists did not migrate in large bands and avoided group settlements when they arrived, they were in no position to organize congregations and build churches. This fact, together with the influence of their past relations with the German Reformed Church, both in Pennsylvania and, to some extent, in the Fatherland, moved them, in many, if not most, instances, to build union churches. This is what happened at St. John's. The deed of 1799 was made to the Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians. The German Reformed are not mentioned in the deed. As far back as the memories of old members go and old meager records show, the Episcopalians and Presbyterians never had a congregation, nor did they ever hold a service at this church; and they do not claim any rights there now. But the German Reformed helped to build both the original log church and the present new brick church. They still hold one-fourth interest in the building and are entitled to one Sunday in each month for their services, although they have become so weak that for the last years they do not use the Sunday to which they are entitled. Some argue that when the deed mentions the "Presbyterians," the German Reformed are meant, a confusion of names having come about by the similarity of doctrines of these two denominations. The mention of the Episcopalians in the deed is readily accounted for by the fact that at that time North Carolina was a royal province and the Episcopal Church was the state church of England, and by the further fact that the Episcopalians, just at this time, were making a systematic attempt to get possession of the Lutheran people and their churches here in the South.

Another thing which to a large extent may account for the confusion of things in religious matters by these early settlers in North Carolina is the fact that there were no pastors among them. These people made the same sad mistake which our Lutheran people are still making in only too many instances — they moved to a place where they thought that they would be able to better their financial condition, but forgot to consider whether they and their children and their children's children would fare better in a religious way. In fact, pastors were scarce in America. It was then as it is now: men were loath to leave their homes of comfort

and refinement, cross a vast ocean, and labor at places where, in order to feed these children of God with the Bread of Life and hold them to the one true faith, they would have to suffer isolation and privation amidst imminent dangers and hardships. So all the blame for these things must not be placed on the shoulders of the laymen — as all the blame must not be placed on the shoulders of the laity for conditions as they exist now as a result of those former conditions. The fields were white already to harvest, but the laborers were few.

As far as records are extant, the first pastor to come to Catawba County, North Carolina, where St. John's is situated, was the Rev. Johann Gottfried Arndt, who arrived there in 1787. The account of his coming runs about thus: In the year 1772 Christopher Lyerly, of Cabarrus County, and Christopher Rendlemann, of Rowan County, made a trip to Germany at their own expense to get a minister or ministers for the work in North Carolina. They applied to the Consistory of Hannover, because the Province of North Carolina was under the government of the King of England, who at that time was Elector of Hannover. These men returned in the fall of 1773, accompanied by the Rev. Adolphus Nussmann, a converted Roman Catholic monk of the Franciscan Order, to be their pastor, and Mr. Johann Gottfried Arndt, to be their parochial school teacher. After teaching for two years, Arndt was ordained by Rev. Joachim Buelow, who signed himself "Missionary and Inspector of South and North Carolina," but of whom nothing else is known. The Rev. Arndt then became pastor of Organ Church, in Rowan County, which he served for eleven years. In 1787 he moved to what is now Catawba County and, in all probability, became the founder of St. John's Church. At least an authority says that he became "the acknowledged founder of the Lutheran Church west of the Catawba River." The oldest Lutheran churches in Catawba County "west of the Catawba River" are St. John's, northeast of Conover, and St. Paul's, southwest of, and nearer to, Conover. Therefore it seems to be proved without doubt that the Rev. Arndt organized this congregation; but just when he began to preach there and organized the congregation are matters of conjecture. There evidently was an organized congregation there when the deed was made, because the title is made to the "elders and their successors in office." Therefore we know that the congregation is now at least one hundred and twenty-five years old. What a mercy of God that His grace has come in an unbroken stream for one and a quarter centuries upon this one

congregation! How many of the souls that once bowed in reverence before this altar are now, or yet shall be, casting their crowns before the great white throne and singing the songs of those eternally redeemed by the Lamb! How many who saw Him here with the eyes of faith have had their hope converted into fruition and now are beholding, or shall behold, Him face to face whom to see is life eternal!

*(To be continued.)*

---