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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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A RAID ON THE INARTICULATE

So, if we were to ask what book, over the past five centuries, next to the Bible itself, has been the most widely read and the most influential within the Christian West, we would not get a debate, or at least not one that would last very long. *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis has had a run like no other book. It first appeared in 1427, and from that time up until about forty years ago it had an appeal that was truly universal. Its wide popularity is something of a surprise, since both its message and its tone are quite definite; it is not at all a “plastic” work that can be shaped by each reader according to his own taste, nor can it be made to bear a multiplicity of interpretations. Such works usually find a pretty narrow audience, but that has not been the case here. It is quite hostile to speculative theology, so much so that it has often been accused of being anti-intellectual, yet it has been embraced and recommended by generations of the Church's finest theologians. It contains a pronounced anti-humanist strain in its mistrust and criticism of purely human values and culture, and yet it was prized above all other books by both Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More of England, the most signal examples of late Renaissance humanism. Because its attitude is anything but pacific – it abounds in metaphors drawn from warfare, and repeatedly insists that human life is best viewed as a kind of military service – we can easily account for the enthusiasm for it that we see in Ignatius of Loyola, who had been a soldier, but then it was also the constant companion of Thérèse of Lisieux, who seems to have memorized the whole thing and quotes from it frequently in her autobiography, and there is hardly a less militaristic personality than hers in the assembly of the saints. Indeed, for five hundred years and more, nearly everybody read it, used it, and praised it.

Things are different now. Although it is still in print, and in several translations and editions, the person who has put in much time with it is very much the rarity. Some theologians and spiritual writers over the past few decades have attacked it and accused it of fostering a piety of noninvolvement in the world that ill accords with the modern emphasis on bearing public witness to Christ and doing the works of the Kingdom of God. Still, there is not a lot of this, and the *Imitation* these days seems to be more ignored than rejected, forgotten rather than defeated. I suppose it is possible that our generation is more spiritually advanced than the earlier generations, and that our spiritual writers are the better judges of what is and isn't valuable, but it is not obvious that this is so. Thomas à Kempis may yet have something to say to us.

Newcomers to the *Imitation* do not usually have an easy time of it; the book, at least today, is very much an acquired taste. One of its more difficult aspects is its seeming repetitiousness. One runs into the same ideas, even the same expressions of those ideas, again and again so that even though it's not a very long book, it looks as if it's a great deal longer than it has to be. Part of this is no doubt an

unintended consequence of the way the work was composed. As best the textual scholars can tell, Thomas à Kempis never had the intention of producing the *Imitation* as a single volume. It first saw the light as thirteen treatises, written independently and perhaps with very different audiences in mind. Thomas himself seems to have then taken these essays, and reworked and combined them into four longer pieces, each of which he again considered to be a separate work. After his death, these four pieces were often placed in a single codex, and so were assumed by later readers to be four parts of a single work. With this kind of literary history, the *Imitation* was bound to have a lot of repetitions.

But if some of this is owing to accidents of composition, much more of it is due to Thomas' deliberate design. The book really is a school of the spiritual life, and Thomas' intention is not just to say what is true, but to say it in such a way as to help the Christian enter into a deeper interior union with God in Christ. If that is the goal, then some things must be said more than once. Also, it may be



that the same notion plays a different role in different contexts, so that what at first glance is a needless repetition of an idea is actually the use of the same tool in a very different construction and with a very different purpose. For example, Thomas often insists on the positive effects of temptations and trials, but this insistence is not always making the same point. In one context he uses it as a warning to the reader against assuming that the suffering of such difficulties means that the soul has been abandoned by God. In another place he uses the same notion as a part of a discussion on how we are made to grow in the practice of the virtues. And in yet a third instance the same idea is brought forward in an explanation of how God uses even our failings to

curb our pride and to wean us away from ourselves, so that we may the more rely on him and feel the effects of his love. Far from being a rambling, repetitious bit of writing, the *Imitation*, with each successive reading, stands out more and more clearly as a work in which there is scarcely a wasted word. The experience of a third or fourth reading of the *Imitation* reminds one of Mark Van Doren's comment on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: No synopsis, whole or part, can hope to succeed; the play is its own synopsis, and nothing shorter will do.

In trying to help the reader realize a deeper interior union with God, the *Imitation* stands solidly within a tradition of "mystical" or "spiritual" theology that stretches back at least as far as the apostle Paul, who said that the goal of his ministry was "to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of the mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Jesus, as the incarnate Word of God, is the personal union of God and man, and as mediator of the new and eternal covenant, he offers to those who belong to him by faith the power of becoming by grace and participation what he is by nature – he is Son of God from all eternity, and we become sons and daughters of God by water and the Holy Spirit. This is not simply a metaphor, a poetic flight of fancy. It is real. The Word of God became what we are so that we might become what he is, and so the goal of our life is now an ever deepening penetration into the mystery of Christ in us, our hope of glory and union with God.

The greatest threat to our responding to the grace of Christ and achieving union with God is what Thomas à Kempis, following Augustine, calls "disordered attachments" to lesser goods. Although Thomas highly recommends solitude and withdrawal from the world to the degree allowed by a person's station in life, he is under no illusion that anyone, even a cloistered monk, can live in the world without making use of the things of the world. Indeed, God's overflowing goodness is especially evident in the spiritual and temporal blessings experienced by even the poorest among us. The problem is not with either our physical nature that must make use of these things nor with the things themselves, but with our tendency to cling to some things in a disordered way, that is, in a way that fails to respect the

relative worth of the things themselves and fails to refer them to God, who is always the greatest good. The world and the goods of the world do not exist in an unorganized heap; there is both order and hierarchy, and our own likings and judgments ought to reflect this truth. My car is indeed a good thing, but my son or daughter is a better thing. My career and the satisfaction that it gives me are good things and blessings from God, but my vocation as a disciple of Jesus is a greater thing, and should be more highly regarded by me. My own life and bodily health is a great value, but of still greater value is the state of my soul and my standing before God. Sin is a bad choice, the choosing of a lesser good and treating it as if it were greater than it really is. In serious sin, a lesser good is taken to be the greatest good of all, and is set up in place of God. Thus Thomas sees a kind of pride or prideful idolatry as the root and origin of all sin that is deadly.

When I or something else that I love becomes my god, then obviously my interest in union with God vanishes, and my soul is poured out and scattered in a thousand different directions, as I lose myself in the pursuit of my inconstant and ever changing inordinate attachments. The remedy for this is the detachment of my will and disordered love from these things – I may still have to remain involved with some of them – and hanging my heart where it belongs, on God who has made us for himself and who alone can satisfy the longings of the heart. This is not easy medicine to take. God is invisible, and so many of his blessings are highly visible and highly touchable. Our senses and our sensual nature, which seem to have a mind of their own as an effect of sin, turn out to be not very cooperative, and so there is a painful and slow “mortification” of the senses and appetites that is an essential first step in the spiritual life, and on which Thomas spends no little attention. This mortification is not inspired by a hatred of the body or of physical nature, nor is it purely negative; it is done to clear away the distractions and allow the soul to follow its more authentic and more profound hunger and thirst for God. Union with God is always the goal and end of the life of the spirit in Thomas à Kempis.

The very word *union* calls to mind the related word, *communion*, and it is no accident that the fourth and final book of the *Imitation* is devoted to the sacrament of the Eucharist. At the heart of Holy Communion is sacrifice, the offering of one’s own self to God in a complete and perfect way, which is union with him. Jesus did this in his death on the cross, and his sacrifice still lives and is effective in the sacrament. It is not that we are spectators in this drama of love between the Son and the Father. We are a part of it, for we are members of the body of Christ. At Mass we actualize the grace of our Baptism, we join our lives to Christ and thus we offer ourselves, we are offered up with him, in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Eucharist thus becomes an education in and a support to that most basic dynamic of the spiritual life, the withdrawal of the heart from created things so as to savor and taste eternal things.

The mystery of the Eucharist is of a piece with the mystery of Christ in us, our hope of glory. Neither can be picked apart or known by means of our words or analytical categories. We have books and spiritual writings that treat such things, but they are of limited value, as the poet T. S. Eliot well knew. In his *Four Quartets* he says that every attempt to learn the use of words to plumb the depths of reality is bound to fail.

*...And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.*

The task must be undertaken – silence is simply not an option – but the conditions of the modern world in which it must be conducted, he says, “seem unpropitious.” If so, then it is well worth the effort to learn the foreign language of our past so as to listen with unprejudiced ears to what comes to us from that strange country. It will not solve our dilemma, but it may take us further than we could get by our own lights. *The Imitation of Christ* of Thomas à Kempis is surely one of the more successful “raids on

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