



THE  
IMITATION  
OF  
CHRIST







# The Imitation of Christ

Thomas à Kempis



*Revised Translation*

Edited with an Introduction by

Mary Lea Hill, FSP



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*In loving memory of  
Sister Mary Nazarene, FSP,  
for the gift and witness of her life*





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## Introduction

You are holding in your hands a very powerful book. A book far more powerful than anything found in popular fiction, the kind that contains secret formulas for solving mysteries and makes you superior to all the disruptive forces in life. The difference is that, unlike these books from fiction with their imaginary powers, this is a book of real power, real mystery, and real victory.

The title is both terse and telling: *The Imitation of Christ*. It concerns a master and his disciple. The master is the greatest hero in our history, Jesus Christ, and each of us is the disciple. Jesus fought and overcame a foe that we contend with daily although we are so often unaware and unprepared. This foe is the evil one who comes under the cloak of discouragement, fear, envy, pride, laziness, and concupiscence.

Life is a mystery. We are all confronted by problems, we face challenges, and we endure sufferings. Sometimes these are more serious than at other times.

These external forces may seem overwhelming, but most of our effort at discipleship is spent internally on the unseen struggles of our soul. And, how we deal with life's bigger crosses often depends on how we cope day to day with our defects and our weaknesses, our duties and our disappointments, our reactions and our relationships. Daily trials, temptations, and tribulations need not confound us. In these we look to Jesus, and we try to model ourselves on him.



Jesus is Son of God, but while here on earth he was a man like us in everything but sin. His life developed from birth and through childhood as ours did. He made friends and lost some of them; learned a trade and struggled to make a living; pursued a calling to great responsibility which was accompanied by misunderstanding, challenges, confrontations, misinterpretation, exhausting travel, anguish of soul, physical torment, and finally, unjust death.

His life was wrapped up in beauty, goodness, and joy, but also confined by convention, necessity, and suffering. Jesus did not come here as a prince, nor did he promise us a life of comfort and satisfaction. He came as a leader, as the one who would be our example. In the Gospel he calls himself “the way, the truth, and the life”



(Jn 14:6). Christ expands on this in *The Imitation of Christ*, saying, “Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. I am the Way that you must follow; the Truth that you must believe; the Life that you must hope for” (Book III, Chapter 56). Although we are familiar with the life of Christ through the four Gospel stories, we are not always prepared to follow his example in our own daily life.

For this reason Christians have sought advice from *The Imitation of Christ*. It is one of the premier books of spiritual wisdom treasured by saints and sinners.

*The Imitation of Christ* is written as four books of conversation between Christ and the believer. By reading it we enter into the conversation and the exchange becomes our own. Sometimes we are the questioner and sometimes Christ is questioning us. The Master we find is honest and frank. He does not evade issues, nor does he sugarcoat our failures. He leads us straight into the fray, but stands by us with his comforting strength.

“Therefore, take up your cross and follow Jesus, and you will attain eternal life” (Book II, Chapter 12). This is the essential message of *The Imitation of Christ*. It is an ascetic work originally written for young monks in training, but it also addresses the spiritual journey of every Christian. It sets before the reader an ever-widening challenge beginning with Book I:

Useful Admonitions for a Spiritual Life; Book II: Admonitions Concerning the Interior Life; Book III: Interior Consolation; and Book IV: The Sacrament of the Altar. It intends to inspire and prod us in our search for meaning in life, especially in life's mundane and difficult aspects. A person who is not a member of a religious community may find some of the advice to be daunting and more than can be expected of a lay person. While that is true of matters of discipline, such as silence or relinquishing certain friendships, for example, in each chapter there is a kernel of true Christian conduct applicable to every follower of Christ. As we take up *The Imitation of Christ*, we open our minds and hearts to Christ and freely speak to him of our struggles and hopes.



It is commonly believed that Thomas à Kempis was the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, although the book was published anonymously. There is a preserved volume, however, that bears his signature. In any case, *The Imitation of Christ* is the product of a school of spirituality that was prevalent throughout the Rhine Valley and the Netherlands in the 1400s. This school is generally referred to as *Devotio Moderna*, the New Devotion. It was a school of reform in its day, an attempt to revitalize

the Church by showing how to live a life of simple devotion. So, author or not, through *The Imitation of Christ* Thomas became the spokesman for his times.

Thomas à Kempis was born Thomas Haemerken at Kempen, a town of artisans near Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1380. He left home at thirteen to join an older brother at the schools of Deventer, Holland. Soon, however, Thomas entered religious life among the Brothers of the Common Life, a secular confraternity founded by Geert Groote. This group tried to duplicate the life and spirit of the early Jerusalem Church, with each member supporting himself, sharing all in common, and living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Thomas was an accomplished copyist. In fact, he produced a four-volume copy of the Bible that is still extant. In time, Thomas transferred to the newly erected monastery of the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine in Zwolle, Holland. Here he was ordained a priest, then appointed subprior and given the duty of instructing new members. To fulfill this duty he wrote a number of other works, including *Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*, *The Incarnation and Life of Our Lord*, *The Founders of the New Devotion*, *Sermons to the Novices Regular*, *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, and *Meeting the Master in the Garden*. After a long life of service to his community and to the poor, Thomas à Kempis died in

1471 and was buried at his monastery. His remains were later transferred to the Church of Saint Michael in Zwolle. The inscription carved on his memorial reads: “To the honor, not the memory, of Thomas à Kempis, whose name endures beyond any monument.”

Amazingly, his book, *The Imitation of Christ*, has spoken to the contemporary situation of people for more than 600 years. This ability to relate to the human heart, wherever and whenever, has made this small volume a classic.

You will profit more by beginning from the first chapter and reflectively reading through all four books, but do not hesitate to open anywhere and enter into the conversation. As you do, pray with the psalmist, “Let me hear what the Lord GOD will say within me” (Ps 85:8).

Is the style too passive for today’s Christians, who are expected to take responsibility for their faith? Is the language unfamiliar? Is the tone too stern and demanding for our contemporary worldview? It is a stronger challenge than we might expect, but is it really too much for a generation of “personal best-ers?” A good number of people today are in search of a challenge, not necessarily a competition, but a personal goal. The biking, running, climbing generation also deserves an inner challenge. *The Imitation of Christ* offers the personal

goal that will motivate us to seek to grow in virtue and union with our Master Athlete, Jesus Christ our Lord. Approach reading *The Imitation of Christ* as a spiritual workout, taking small steps daily. The reward will be a firm faith, a total commitment to the following of Christ, and a love that surrounds and surpasses all this life sets before you.

MARY LEA HILL, FSP





BOOK I

*Useful Admonitions  
for a Spiritual Life*









## CHAPTER 1

# Imitation of Christ and contempt for worldly vanities

1. “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness” (Jn 8:12). These are the words of Christ, by which we are counseled to imitate his life and way of acting. If we truly want to be enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart, then let our principal study be meditation on the life of Jesus Christ.

2. The doctrine of Christ surpasses all the doctrines of the saints, and whoever has its spirit will find a hidden manna in it (see Rev 2:17).

But for many it happens that after frequently hearing the Gospel, it has little effect because they do not have the spirit of Christ.

Those who would fully and joyfully understand the words of Christ must study how they can make their whole lives conform to that of Christ.

3. Of what use is it to argue profoundly about the Trinity if you have no humility and consequently are displeasing to the Trinity?

In truth, sublime words do not make one holy and just. However, a virtuous life makes one dear to God.

For my part, I would rather feel repentance than be able to define it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart and the sayings of all the philosophers, what would it all profit you without the love and the grace of God?

“Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity” (Eccl 1:2), except loving God and serving only him (see Deut 6:13; 10:20).

This is the greatest wisdom: to despise the world and to aspire to the kingdom of heaven.

4. It is vanity, therefore, to seek wealth and to place your trust in it, when it will certainly disappear.

It is vanity also to be ambitious for honors and high positions.

It is vanity to indulge the desires of the flesh, and to involve yourself in things for which you will later be grievously punished.

It is vanity to wish for a long life and not to be concerned with leading a good life. It is vanity also to be attentive only to this present life, and not to look forward to those things which are to come.

It is vanity to love that which passes quickly, and not to concentrate on eternal joy.

5. Remember often the proverb: “The eye is not satisfied to see, or the ear to hear” (Eccl 1:8).

Consider how to turn your heart from what is seen to what is unseen, for those who follow only their senses tarnish their conscience and lose the grace of God.

### Reflection

*The followers of Jesus Christ will come to know truth only through love and humble faith. By imitating the example of the Divine Teacher and by practicing his lessons, we will come to understand his doctrine. In other words, we do not become upright persons and friends of God by familiarity with the arts and sciences, but by charity and the practice of Christian virtues. One who knows little, but is contrite and humble of heart, is more pleasing to God than a great philosopher who may be proud and self-centered. The greatest wisdom lies in aspiring to gain the kingdom of heaven. All the rest is vanity.*

### Prayer

*My Jesus, help me understand and live by your teachings that I may please you and be worthy of your kingdom. This is the grace I beg of you, my dear Savior. I place my hope in your infinite mercy. Amen.*



## CHAPTER 2

# Humble self-opinion

1. Everyone naturally desires knowledge, but of what good is it without the fear of God?

Indeed, a humble farmer who serves God is better than a proud philosopher who neglects himself to concentrate on the course of the universe.

Who knows himself well, is little in his own eyes, and is not pleased with human praise.

If I knew about everything in the world and yet had no charity, what would it all mean in the sight of God, who will judge me by my deeds?

2. Calm that excessive desire for knowledge; it can be the source of much distraction and deceit.

Those who are learned want to appear and be recognized as wise (see Mt 22:7).

There are many things that are of little or no use to know.

And it is very unwise to pay attention to certain things that are harmful to one's salvation.

Many words do not satisfy the soul, but a good life gives the mind rest, and a pure conscience gives great confidence in God.

3. When one has great learning, judgment will likewise be greater, unless one's life is also holier.

Therefore, do not think too much of your mastery of art or science, but rather be cautious of your knowledge.

If it seems to you that you know many things and understand them well enough, know at the same time that there are many more things of which you are ignorant.

Do not be conceited, but rather acknowledge your ignorance. Why prefer yourself to others when there are many more learned and skilled in the law than yourself?

If you desire to understand anything in this regard, love being unknown and being esteemed as nothing.

4. This is the highest and most profitable lesson: truly to know and think little of yourself.

It is great wisdom and high perfection to be unconcerned about ourselves and to be kind and attentive to others.

If you witness the sin or grave fault of another, do not think you are better because you do not know how long you will remain in a good state.

We are all frail, but imagine no one is frailer than you.

## Reflection

*This chapter is clearly summed up in the words of St. Paul the Apostle: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."*

*Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him” (1 Cor 8:1–2). The better we know ourselves, the more humble we are. And since humility is the foundation of all virtues, our sanctification and growth in perfection will depend on the depth of our humility.*

### Prayer

*My Jesus, cure me of the desire to know everything. Instead give me great care for my eternal salvation. For I know you will judge me, not on the amount of knowledge I have amassed, but on my attention to salvation. Lord, give to all of us the grace to know, esteem, love, and practice the virtue of humility. Amen.*



## CHAPTER 3

### Study of truth

1. Happy those taught by truth itself, not by passing examples and words, but as it is in itself (see Num 12:8), thus making truth always easy to recognize.

Our opinion and our intuition often deceive us and reveal little.

To what purpose is a great dispute about hidden and obscure matters, if, at the judgment, there is no reproof for not knowing about them?

It is really foolish to neglect profitable and necessary things and willingly busy ourselves about what is curious and harmful. We “have eyes, but do not see” (Jer 5:21).

2. And why be concerned about the various kinds and species of beings?

One to whom the eternal Word speaks is freed from theorizing.

All things come from this one Word (see Jn 1:3), and all things speak to us of him; and this is what has been said to us also from the beginning (see Jn 8:25).

Without him, no one understands or judges rightly.

He to whom all things are one and who draws all things into one and who sees all things in one may be steady in heart and peaceably repose in God.

Oh Truth! My God, make me one with you in eternal love (see Jer 31:3).

Often I am wearied by reading and hearing many things; in you is everything I need and all I desire.

Let all teachers refrain from speaking; let all creatures remain silent before you. You alone speak to me.

3. The more integrated and uncomplicated one is, the more effortless and astute will be his understanding because he will be enlightened from above.

One whose spirit is pure, simple, and steady is not distracted by a multitude of duties because he performs all of them for God's glory and endeavors to avoid purely personal satisfaction.

What can hinder or trouble you more than uncontrolled affections?

A person who wishes to be good and devout, first of all puts his interior life in order and then attends to his other duties.

Those unruly inner desires are held in check by his good sense. Is any struggle greater than the effort to overcome one's self?

However, this must be our main concern: the daily effort to overcome our weaknesses and to gain self-mastery, always becoming better.

4. All perfections in this life are accompanied by some imperfections and all our speculations with a certain obscurity.

Humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than the deepest scientific studies.

Learning is not to be condemned, nor the mere knowledge of anything. This is good in itself and ordained by God, but a good conscience and a virtuous life are always to be preferred.

However, many concentrate on obtaining knowledge for its own sake and not in order to be better persons, and so they are deceived and produce little or no good results.



5. Imagine if people would be as diligent about uprooting vices and planting virtues as they are in proposing questions; how fewer evils and scandals there would be among them, and how much less laxity in monasteries.

Truthfully, when the Day of Judgment comes, we will not be examined on what we have read, but on what we have done; not on how cleverly we have spoken, but on how devoutly we have lived.

Tell me, where are all those great teachers and writers with whom you were so well acquainted during their lifetime, while their reputations flourished?

Others have now taken their places, and I'm not sure whether they are even remembered. In their lifetime they seemed so important, but are they even spoken of now? (see Gal 2:6).

6. How quickly the glory of this world passes! (see 1 Jn 2:17). If only their lives could have conformed to their learning! Then they would have studied and read advantageously.

How many lose their way through useless study and little care for the service of God!

And because they prefer greatness to humility, they lose themselves in their own daydreams (see Rom 1:21).

One who is truly great has great charity.

One is truly great who is little in his own eyes and esteems all honors as nothing.

One is truly prudent who, in order to find Christ, considers everything else on earth as nothing (see Phil 3:8).

And one is very intelligent who follows the will of God instead of one's own will.

### Reflection

*It is better to study, not simply to know, in order to live what we have learned. Listen attentively to the Eternal Word, who speaks more to the heart than to the mind. To know and to do what is necessary for our salvation constitutes a true Christian conscience.*

### Prayer

*Jesus, you have told us: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Form in me a genuinely Christian mind and heart, so that my life may be truly Christian. May I be detached from all mere things and seek you alone in all my thoughts, words, and actions. Make me worthy of your love now and for all eternity. Amen.*



## CHAPTER 4

**Prudence in acting**

1. We must not believe every word or follow every suggestion, but carefully and prudently weigh the matter according to God (see Eccl 9:16).

Unfortunately, we are often quicker to believe and repeat evil about another than what is good: that is how weak we are!

The perfect, however, do not easily believe every report, because they know human weakness, which is both very prone to evil and liable to fail in words.

2. It is great wisdom not to do things rashly, nor to persist obstinately in our own opinion.

It is also wisdom not to believe the word of everyone, nor to immediately share with others what we have heard or what has been confided to us.

Consult the wise and conscientious (see Tob 4:19), and seek to be instructed by someone better than you, instead of relying on your own counsel.

A good life makes a person wise before God and expert in many things.

The more humble one is and the more docile to God, the wiser and more at peace that one will be.

## Reflection

*Spreading false reports is imprudent and uncharitable. It causes enmities, hatred, and lost friendships. God does not simply forgive a person guilty of talebearing. To receive God's pardon, the sinner must repair the harm done and reconcile with the persons offended. Although it is easy enough to hear things, be slow in speaking about them. Prudence never repeats what is heard about another, whether true or not.*

## Prayer

*O Lord, grant me the grace to observe perfectly the commandment of love. This obligation you first gave to all your children with the words: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Then you laid it down as the signature trait of your faithful followers: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). This love always takes the form of respect. May my love be as yours, strong and tender, that I may be recognized as your own. Amen.*