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“The Imitation of Christ”: Sacred Scripture in Spiritual Life

In this study, I would like to encourage my readers to evaluate their approach to Sacred Scripture with the aid of one of the most popular spiritual guidebooks that was written in the late Middle Ages. The ascetic work *The Imitation of Christ*,¹ which has been known since 1418, is commonly ascribed to Thomas à Kempis (Thomas Hemerken, an Augustinian who lived in 1379–1471), who was perhaps the last editor of the thought of Geert Groote († 1384), who popularized spiritual renewal in the Netherlands and was the father of an ascetic current known as *devotio moderna*. His followers created what is known as the Congregation of Windesheim, a congregation of canons regular who were fascinated with the idea of a common life based on a slightly modified Rule of St. Augustine. Influenced by the guidelines of Geert Groote, they wanted to “preserve faith in Christ’s Church; believe in Sacred Scripture in harmony with the understanding of the Fathers; living according to the Gospel in poverty and chastity; and not waste time on geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, dialectics, grammar, poetry, or astrology. In other words, they wanted to avoid all knowledge with the exception of ethics, which the wisest sages of antiquity, Socrates and Plato, had reduced philosophy to anyway. Furthermore, they decided to not study any science that brought profit, such as medicine or civil or canon law; they never sought to receive academic degrees in theology. The root of

1 There are many studies of Thomas à Kempis’ work, just as there are many different translations into modern languages. In the introduction to this article, I quote Jan Sochoń’s introduction to the Polish translation of the book: Tomasz à Kempis, *O naśladowaniu Chrystusa*, przekł. M. Gajkowski, wstęp J. Sochoń, Poznań 2002, s. 5–21; por. Tomasz à Kempis, *O naśladowaniu Chrystusa*, przekł. A. Kamieńska, przedm. opatrzył J. Twardowski, Warszawa 1980, p. 5–18.

all study was to be Christ's Gospel and it was supposed to be a mirror of life."² Such an approach clearly marks *The Imitation of Christ*.

This work, which is divided into five parts (called "books"), is a collection of observations related to practices of the spiritual life. In the third book it always takes the form of a dialogue between a disciple and Christ, and in the fourth it sometimes takes this form. Thus the question of the relationship between Christ and His presentation in the Bible is legitimate. It is interesting and even a cursory study of this volume shows that it frequently quotes the Bible, but it says little about the role of Sacred Scripture in forging a bond with God, while the entire fourth book is devoted to Holy Communion and the relationship between the soul and the master on this journey.

When reflecting on several selected fragments of *The Imitation of Christ*, I make use of the fruits of a seminar that was held at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow in 2011. Pavel Habrovec, Marcin Kaznowski, SDB, Marek Kostur and Magdalena Marek have sent their written reflections after the discussion about most of these fragments; I sincerely thank them for their contribution. In my discussion, I recourse to all the written comments, trying to give birth to a final product, our consensus in understanding the commented fragment rather than the individual input of individual persons.

1. From Book One: On the Imitation of Christ and the Study of the Truth³

The first three fragments of the text come from the beginning of Book One, where in chapters 1–5 the conditions for knowing the truth are discussed;

Cap. I. De imitatione Christi et contemptu mundi omniumque eius vanitatum

1. Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris dicit Dominus. Haec sunt verba Christi, quibus admonemur quatenus vitam eius et mores imitemur, si volumus veraciter illuminari, et ab omni caecitate cordis liberari. Summum igitur studium nostrum, sit in vita Jesu meditari.

2. Doctrina Ejus omnes doctrinas Sanctorum praececlit, et qui spiritum haberet absconditum ibi manna inveniret. Sed contingit quod multi ex frequenti auditu Evangelii parvum desiderium

2 S. Swieżawski, *Dzieje europejskiej filozofii klasycznej*, Warszawa–Wrocław 2000, p. 830.

3 The Latin text of all fragments comes from: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/index.html> [12.12.2016]; English translation: Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. A. Croft, H. Bolton, p. 3.

sentiant, quia spiritum Christi non habent. Qui autem vult plene et sapide verba Christi intelligere, oportet ut totam vitam suam illi studeat conformare.

3. Quid prodest tibi alta de Trinitate disputare, si careas humilitate unde displiceas Trinitati? Vere alta verba non faciunt sanctum et justum, sed virtuosa vita efficit Deo carum. Opto magis sentire compunctionem quam scire definitionem. Si scires totam Bibliam, et omnium philosophorum dicta quid totum prodesset, sine charitate et gratia? Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas praeter amare Deum et illi soli fervire. Ista est summa sapientia per contemptum mundi tendere ad regna caelestia. [...]

Chapter 1: Imitating Christ and Despising All Vanities on Earth

1. "He who follows Me, walks not in darkness," says the Lord (John 8 : 12). By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate His life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ.

2. The teaching of Christ is more excellent than all the advice of the saints, and he who has His spirit will find in it a hidden manna. Now, there are many who hear the Gospel often but care little for it because they have not the spirit of Christ. Yet whoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ.

3. What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life that makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it. For what would it profit us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers, if we live without grace and the love of God? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone. That is the greatest wisdom - to seek the kingdom of heaven through contempt of the world. [...]

The beginning of this work, which consists of simple maxims and most likely is a compilation of parts that had previously existed on their own (perhaps they corresponded to today's "books") clearly directs the entirety towards the topic of wisdom and the true light. This is the meaning of the quote from the Gospel of John (John 8 : 12) that has been chosen as the *incipit*, which is clearly visible in the body of the first paragraph (I, I, 1). The titular *imitatio Christi* is understood as walking in His footsteps and serves to "live in the light" and avoid the "blindness of the heart." In this context, walking in Jesus' footsteps above all means zealous meditation on His life. The emphasis on zealousness points towards the importance of the engagement of the will in the process of cognition. Later guidelines (I, I, 2–3) are of a similar spirit: knowing Christ occurs through moral choices, "contrition," "contempt of the

world,” and “a virtuous life” shaped through His words, which summarize the dual commandment to love God and one’s neighbor. We have an allusion to this in this brief introduction: the one thing that is not a vanity is to “love God and serve Him alone.”⁴

In this, however, one should pose the question of the role of intellectual cognition and its sources, in particular the Bible, in attaining the “highest wisdom.” It is difficult not to notice the scornful treatment of knowledge of “the whole Bible by heart” or even “hear[ing] the Gospel,” while at the same time in this fragment when the author speaks of the Gospel he thinks above all about Jesus’ teaching and words. However, he criticizes not familiarity with Sacred Scripture as such but making it a reason to be proud and disconnecting knowledge gained from the Bible from everyday life. The basic “tool” for a fruitful reading is having “Christ’s spirit,” and thus “God’s love and grace.” Everything else compared to this is “vanity of vanities.” From this statement to the end of Chapter 1, various “vanities” are named. The Word speaks only when the Lord speaks; Scripture requires one to listen.

Chapter 2 deals with the basic subjective condition for accepting the Word; it is titled: *Having a Humble Opinion of Oneself*. We avoid it in our analysis in order to move on to the next chapter, which is very interesting from a methodological point of view.⁵

Cap. 3. De doctrina veritatis

1. Felix quem Veritas per se ipsam docet, non per figuras et voces transeuntes, sed sicuti se habet. Nostra opinio, et noster sensus saepe nos fallit, et modicum videt. Quid prodest magna cavillatio de occultis, et obscuris rebus de quibus nec argueur in iudicio, quia ignoravimus? Grandis insipientia quod neglectis utilibus, et necessariis, ultro intendimus curiosis, et damnosis. Oculos habentes, non videmus.

2. Et quid nobis de generibus et speciebus, cui aeternum Verbum loquitur a multis opinionibus expeditur. Ex uno Verbo omnia, et unum loquuntur omnia et hoc est Principium quod et loquitur nobis. Nemo sine illo intelligit, aut recte iudicat. Cui omnia unam sunt, et qui omnia ad unum trahit, et omnia in uno videt, potest stabilis esse, et in Deo pacificus permanere. O veritas Deus, fac me unum tecum in charitate perpetua. Taedet mihi saepe multa legere, et audire: in te totum

4 Some translations of this work read: “What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if you lack compassion for others?” (I, I, 3). Meanwhile, the Latin text (and the translation by Croft and Bolton) read: *Quid prodest tibi alta de Trinitate disputare, si careas humilitate*. Such translators, however, are correct in that this is also a reference to one’s neighbor.

5 Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft, Harold Bolton, p. 4.

est, quod volo et desidero. Taceant omnes doctores, sileant universae creaturae in conspectu tuo, tu mihi loquere solus.

Chapter 3: The Doctrine of Truth

1. Happy is he to whom truth manifests itself, not in signs and words that fade, but as it actually is. Our opinions, our senses often deceive us and we discern very little. What good is much discussion of involved and obscure matters, when our ignorance of them will not be held against us on Judgment Day? Neglect of things which are profitable and necessary and undue concern with those which are irrelevant and harmful, are great folly. We have eyes and do not see.

2. What, therefore, have we to do with questions of philosophy? He to whom the Eternal Word speaks is free from theorizing. For from this Word are all things, and of Him, all things speak - the Beginning, Who also speaks to us. Without this Word no man understands or judges aright. He to whom it becomes everything, who traces all things to it and who sees all things in it, may ease his heart and remain at peace with God. O God, You Who are the truth, make me one with You in love everlasting. I am often wearied by the many things I hear and read, but in You is all that I long for. Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me.

At the very beginning, the author professes a longing for "Truth." He wants to be a disciple. However, like the entire *devotio moderna* movement, his anti-intellectualism is clear. He openly confesses that he is "often wearied by the many things [he] hear[s] and read[s]." He does not know why he should deal "with questions of philosophy." The author considers them to be among things that are "irrelevant and harmful" and attract fools. He is not convinced by the speculative method and expresses skepticism towards the reasonableness of fathoming revelation through reason. Likewise, he does not trust cognition through ephemeral voices and images (*per figuras et voces transeuntes*), which appears to be a clear allusion to exegesis, especially allegorical exegesis, of Sacred Scripture. In his view, happy are those whom God allows to know the truth directly, not through words and signs.

The author of *The Imitation of Christ* clearly emphasizes the primacy of learning the truth non-conceptually and person contact with God as the One who reveals Himself. "Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me." Can anything more be said about how Thomas à Kempis sees this kind of cognition? This is cognition in the simple conceptualization of the unity of God's Word, which is the Truth. Thus this Word did not so much speak as it continues to speak to those who know how to listen. "For from this Word are all things" and it is enough to know how to reduce

everything to one thing and to remain at peace with God.” This is the grace of unification in love, contemplation in the silence of the entirety of created reality. Only the Word (*Verbum, Logos*), from which Sacred Scripture also flows, is at the source of the message of wisdom. The only sense of abundantly citing both the Old and New Testaments from memory is to enable a living relationship with Christ. Contact with Christ is presented as much more important than reading Sacred Scripture. What is more, although the author encourages us to read the Bible, it seems that in his view it is not indispensable to attaining unity with Christ. Reading the Gospel is not enough; one must also have the “spirit of Christ.” It is the imitation of Christ and not reading that allows us to fully understand His words. However, because imitation is not possible without previous cognition, here we are dealing with something of a hermeneutic circle.

Chapter 4 deals with “Prudence in Action” and what precedes it; it is related to the maxim: “Do not yield to every impulse and suggestion but consider things carefully and patiently in the light of God’s will.” It ends with two maxims referring once again to the topic of truth and wisdom: “A good life makes a man wise according to God and gives him experience in many things, for the more humble he is and the more subject to God, the wiser and the more at peace he will be in all things.” After this, the brief Chapter 5, the only one that is devoted to Sacred Scripture,⁶ appears:

Cap. 5. De lectione scripturarum

1. Veritas est in Scripturis sanctis quaerenda, non eloquenda. Omnis Scriptura sacra eo spiritu debet legi, quo facta est. Quaerere debemus potius utilitatem in Scripturis, quam subtilitatem sermonis. Ita libenter devotos et simplices libros legere debemus, sicut altos et profundos. Non te defendat auctoritas Scribentis utrum parvae vel magnae litteraturae fuerit, sed amor purae veritatis te trahat ad legendum. Non quaeras quis hoc dixerit, sed quid dicatur attende.

2. Homines transeunt, sed veritas Domini manet in aeternum. Sine personarum acceptione variis modis nobis loquitur Deus. Curiositas nostra saepe nos impedit in lectione Scripturarum, cum volumus intelligere et discutere ubi simpliciter est transeundum. Si vis profectum haurire lege humiliter, simpliciter, et fideliter nec unquam velis habere nomen scientiae. Interroga libenter, et audi tacens Sanctorum verba, nec displiceant tibi parabolae Seniorum sine cause enim non proferuntur.

6 Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft, Harold Bolton, p. 7.

Chapter 5: Reading the Holy Scripture

1. Truth, not eloquence, is to be sought in reading the Holy Scriptures; and every part must be read in the spirit in which it was written. For in the Scriptures we ought to seek profit rather than polished diction. Likewise we ought to read simple and devout books as willingly as learned and profound ones. We ought not to be swayed by the authority of the writer, whether he be a great literary light or an insignificant person, but by the love of simple truth. We ought not to ask who is speaking, but mark what is said.

2. Men pass away, but the truth of the Lord remains forever. God speaks to us in many ways, without regard for persons. Our curiosity often impedes our reading of the Scriptures, when we wish to understand and mull over what we ought simply to read and pass by. If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the sayings of the ancients, for they were not made with any purpose.

The author of these instructions is clearly indisposed towards ascribing meaning to the form of pronouncements from either the Bible or other devotional literature or even the oral communications or literary gifts of people through whom God's message is transmitted. By the way, one can notice that he (perhaps unconsciously) equates reading Sacred Scripture with making use of other devotional literature. In any case, the purpose of knowing God is not the wisdom of the sages, but the wisdom of striving for the kingdom of heaven. Humility, simplicity, and faith, not the fame of the scholar, should be the benefits resulting from reading Scripture. The world should be more imbued than understood. For the believer, revelation is the spiritual path he or she walks, searching for fulfillment in mystical unity with God. In order to become one with God's love, one must first know Christ and follow in His footsteps, which leads to knowing Him more deeply and allows for a more faithful imitation of Him. The attention of the imitator of Christ focuses, therefore, on "truth" and "prophet." He or she will thus end up on the side of the contents, not the form. It is clear that Thomas à Kempis sees a strong connection between Sacred Scripture and "the sayings of the ancients" and praises listening to "the words of the saints." Sacred Scripture becomes immersed in literature and culture; human cognition consolidates one Logos from which the philosophers came. However, for Thomas reading the Bible "in the spirit in which it was written" means a contemplative attitude: "simplicity and faith" and "listen[ing] attentively," not the "curiosity" (*curiositas*) of mulling over and discussion.

2. Book Three, Chapter 2: Truth Speaks Inwardly without the Sound of Words⁷

We will now analyze the fragment of *The Imitation of Christ* in which the author introduces the reader to the world of internal, contemplative contact with Christ, which, as we have seen in our analysis of the beginning, is placed above intellectual and even Biblical cognition of the world. The third book, *Internal Consolation*, which introduces the form of an internal dialogue between the “soul” and Christ, begins with the chapter *The Inward Conversation of Christ with the Faithful Soul* and from the beginning puts emphasis on internal speaking: “Blessed is the soul who hears the Lord speaking with her [...] and pay[s] no heed to the murmurings of this world” (III, I, 1). Chapter 2 develops this thought, which has the form of a prayer directed to Jesus Christ:

Cap. 2. Quod veritas intus loquitur sine strepitu

1. Loquere Domine, quin audit servus tuus. Servus tuus ego sum, da mihi intellectum, ut sciam testimonia tua. Inclina cor meum in verba oris mei. Fluat ut ros eloquium tuum, dicebant olim filii Israel ad Moysen. Loquere nobis tu, et audiemus; non loquatur Dominus nobis, ne forte moriamur. Non sic, Domine, non sic oro, sed magis cum Samuele propheta humiliter ad disideranter obsecro. Loquere Domine, quia audit servus tuus. Non loquatur Moyses mihi, aut aliquis ex Prophetis, sed potius tu loquere, Domine Deus, inspirator et illuminator omnium Prophetarum, quia tu solus sine eis potes me perfecte imbuere, illi autem sine te nihil proficient.

2. Possunt quidem verba sonare, sed spiritum non conferunt. Pulcherrime dicunt, sed te tante cor non accedunt. Litteras tradunt, sed tu sensum aperis. Mysteria referunt, sed tu referas intellectum signatorum. Mandata edunt, sed tu juvas ad perficiendum. Viam ostendunt, sed tu confortas ad ambulandum. Illi foris tantum agunt, sed tu corda instruis, et illuminas. Illi exterius rigant, sed tu fecunditatem donas. Illi clamant verbis, sed tu auditui intelligentiam tribuis.

3. Non ergo mihi loquatur Moyses, sed tu, Domine Deus meus, aeterna veritas, ne forte moriar, et sine fructu efficiar, si fuero tantum foris admonitus, et intus non accensus, ne sit mihi ad iudicium verbum auditum, et non factum cognitum nec amatum creditum, et non servatum. Loquere igitur, Domine, quia audit servus tuus: verba enim vitae aeternae habes. Loquere mihi ad qualemcumque animae meae consolationem, et ad totius vitae meae emendationem, tibi autem ad gloriam et perpetuum honorem.

⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft, Harold Bolton, p. 55–56.

Chapter 2: Truth Speaks Inwardly without the Sound of Words

1. "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth" (1 Kings 3 : 9). "I am Thy Servant. Give me understanding that I may know Thine ordinances" (Psalms 119 : 125)... "Incline my heart to Thine ordinances" (Psalms 119 : 36)... "Let Thy speech distill as the dew" (Deuteronomy 32 : 2). The children of Israel once said to Moses: "Speak thou to us and we will hear thee: let not the Lord speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20 : 19). Not so, Lord, not so do I pray. Rather with Samuel the prophet I entreat humbly and earnestly: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." Do not let Moses or any of the prophets speak to me; but You speak, O Lord God, Who inspired and enlightened the prophets; for You alone, without them, can instruct me perfectly, whereas they, without You can do nothing.

2. They, indeed, utter fine words, but they cannot impart the spirit. They do indeed speak beautifully, but if You remain silent they cannot inflame the heart. They deliver the message; You lay bare the sense. They place before us mysteries, but You unlock their meaning. They proclaim commandments; You help us to keep them. They point out the way; You give strength for the journey. They work only outwardly; You instruct and enlighten our hearts. They water on the outside; You given the increase. They cry out words; You give understanding to the hearer.

3. Let not Moses speak to me, therefore, but You, the Lord my God, everlasting truth, speak lest I die and prove barren if I am merely given outward advice and not inflamed within; lest the word heard and not kept, known and not loved, believed and not obeyed, rise up in judgment against me. Speak, therefore, Lord, for Your servant listens. "Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6 : 68). Speak to me for the comfort of my soul and for the amendment of my life, for Your praise, Your glory, and Your everlasting honor.

The text of the prayer proposed by the author of *The Imitation of Christ* is particularly valuable from the point of view of this study, as it is of a performative nature. The author wants to suggest to the readers a certain attitude in their relationship with God and introduce them to it. God is summoned here as the "everlasting truth," which, as the contents of these prayers, which suggest an attitude towards cognition, confirms. God asks Him for direct contact, for His consoling, life-giving speech that changes one's life for His praise and glory. For Thomas à Kempis, the Word of God is something much richer than the written text. The text acts only externally and does not have an impact on the believer's soul if it lacks an internal desire of truth and openness to God. Meanwhile, the author gives the most value to internal revelation "without intercession" and "perfectly filled with God's spirit." In fact, it is juxtaposed with what is "written." The aim of this cognition appears to be "comfort of [the] soul." Everything begins with comfort of the soul, which can be comforted

only by life directed towards eternal glory. The body, Church, and world disappear; all that is left is the soul.

Thus revelation is not exhausted in what is given to the Church; it is not a collection of dry truths but a living faith that is transformed into love. What is more, this faith seems to not need intercessors or even the intercession of the “prophets,” i.e. the inspired authors. In any case, Thomas à Kempis’ prayer depreciates cognition through the intercession of the words of the prophets of the Old Testament and even Moses himself: “Not Moses, but you, my Lord and God, the eternal truth, speak to me so that I may not die.” Only such an internal, direct dialogue can give life and enliven the “Letter of Scripture,” which then will be focused on eternal life, not condemnation. The author, who prays somewhat mischievously, here paraphrases Moses’ words to the Israelites gathered at Sinai (see: Exodus 20 : 19). Then, the people feared God speaking directly and instead preferred to listen to the prophet “or we shall die.” Thomas believes that death can lead to settling on the words of intercessors speaking from the “outside,” as they do not have in their hearts that life-giving strength that is demanded from God, who “instructs and enlightens our hearts.” A series of suggestive and poetically beautiful juxtapositions greatly emphasizes this belief (see: III, II, 2).

3. Book Three, Chapter 15⁸

The last presented fragment allows us to see how qualified in his feeling of unity with God the Teacher (Jesus?) the author of *The Imitation of Christ* feels to speak in His name. The beginning of Chapter 15 of Book Three has the form of Him talking to His “son.”

Cap. 15. Qualiter standum sit ad dicendum in omni re desiderabili

1. Fili, sic dicas in omni re: Domine, si tibi placitum fuerit, fiat hoc ita; Domine, si sit honor tuus, fiat in nomine tuo hoc; Domine, si mihi videris expedire et utile esse probaveris, tunc da mihi hoc uti ad honorem tuum. Sed si mihi nocivum fore cognoveris, nec animae meae salutis prodesse, aufer a me tale desiderium. Non enim omne desiderium a Spiritu Sancto est, etiamsi

8 Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft, Harold Bolton, p. 73–74. This fragment was not part of our discussion during the seminar mentioned above in the introduction to the article.

homini videatur justum, rectum et bonum. Difficile est pro vero judicare, an spiritus bonus, aut malus te impellat ad desiderandum hoc vel illud, an etiam ex proprio movearis spiritu. Multi in fine sunt decepti, qui primo bono spiritu videbantur inducti.

2. Igitur semper cum timore Dei, et humilitate cordis desiderandum est et petendum, quidquid desiderabile menti occurrit, maximeque cum propria resignatione mihi totum committendum est atque dicendum. Domine, tu scis qualiter melius est mihi hoc vel illud; sicut volueris, da mihi quod vis et quantum vis et quando vis. Fac mecum sicut scis et sicut tibi magis placuerit, et major honor fuerit tuus. Pone me ubi vis, et liber age mecum in omnibus. In manu tua ego sum, gira et reversa me per circuitum. En ego servus tuus paratus ad omnia: quoniam non desidero mihi vivere, sed tibi, utinam digne et perfecte.

Oratio pro beneplacito faciendo Dei

3. Concede mihi, benignissime Jesu, gratiam tuam, ut mecum sit et mecum laboret, mecumque usque in finem perseveret. Da mihi semper desiderare, et velle quod tibi magis acceptum est, et clarius placet. Tua voluntas mea sit, et mea voluntas tuam sequatur semper, et optime ei concordet. Sit mihi unum velle, et unum nolle tecum: nec aliud posse velle, aut nolle nisi quod vis, aut nolis.

4. Da mihi omnibus mori quae in mundo sunt, et propter te amare contemni, et nesciri in hoc saeculo. Da mihi super omnia desiderata in te quiescere, et cor meum in te pacificare. Tu vera pax cordis, tu sola requies; extra te omnia sunt dura, et inquieta. In hac pace in idipsum, hoc est in te uno et summo et aeterno bono, dormiam et requiescam. Amen.

Chapter 15. How One Should Feel and Speak on Every Desirable Thing

1. My child, this is the way you must speak on every occasion: Lord, if it is pleasing to You, so be it. If it be to Your honor, Lord, be it done in Your name. Lord, if You see that it is expedient and profitable for me, then grant that I may use it to Your honor. But if You know that it will be harmful to me, and of no good benefit to the welfare of my soul, then take this desire away from me. Not every desire is from the Holy Spirit, even though it may seem right and good. It is difficult to be certain whether it is a good spirit or a bad one that prompts one to this or that, and even to know whether you are being moved by your own spirit. Many who seemed at first to be led by a good spirit have been deceived in the end.

2. Whatever the mind sees as good, ask and desire in fear of God and humility of heart. Above all, commit the whole matter to Me with true resignation, and say: "Lord, You know what is better for me; let this be done or that be done as You please. Grant what You will, as much as You will, when You will. Do with me as You know best, as will most please You, and will be for Your greater honor. Place me where You will and deal with me freely in all things. I am in Your hand; turn me about whichever way You will. Behold, I am Your servant, ready to obey in all things. Not for myself to I desire to live, but for You – would that I could do this worthily and perfectly!"

A prayer that the will of God be done

3. Grant me Your grace, O most merciful Jesus, that it may be with me, and work with me, and remain with me to the very end. Grant that I may always desire and will that which is most acceptable and pleasing to You. Let Your will be mine. Let my will always follow Yours and agree perfectly with it. Let my will be one with Yours in willing and in not willing, and let me be unable to will or not will anything but what You will or do not will.

4. Grant that I may die to all things in this world, and for Your sake love to be despised and unknown in this life. [...] You are true peace of heart. You alone are its rest. Without You all things are difficult and troubled. In this peace, the selfsame that it is in You, the Most High, the everlasting Good, I will sleep and take my rest. Amen.

A close examination of the literary construction of this fragment clearly shows that the transfer of the didactic role to the outside subject occurs only in the first sentence; he begins to teach the correct way of praying. From a formal point of view, later on we have the text of a prayer containing a comment justifying a specific way of praying.

However, it can also be noted that the master's instructions develop the first summons of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6 : 9–10; Luke 11 : 2), and even that it is impacted by the experience of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (see: Mark 14 : 36; Matthew 26, 39 : 42; Luke 22 : 42). In the latter part of the text it is more difficult to find a subtext of evangelization, while the prayer that the master teaches to the "son" instead expresses the life experiences and the yearning of the heart of the latter. In its tone and contents it accurately responds to the prayer of the "son" about fulfilling God's will, which is the content of Chapter 15 : 3 of Book Three. Both prayers contain references to Biblical texts originating in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In the words "Behold, I am Your servant, ready to obey in all things," the influence of Psalms 119 : 125 is visible. "I am your servant; give me discernment that I may know your testimonies." The beginning of the *Prayer that the Will of God Be Done* refers to the request from the beginning of Wisdom 9 : 10: "Send her forth from your holy heavens and from your glorious throne dispatch her That she may be with me and work with me, that I may know what is pleasing to you." Meanwhile, the desire to rest in the Lord (III, 15 : 4) brings to mind the last verse of Psalm 4: "In peace I will lie down and fall asleep, for you alone, Lord, make me secure." The Psalms and other fragments of Sacred Scripture frequently repeated by the author of the text of the prayer to a large extent inspires his way of thinking. However, this is his

own request and understanding of the teaching of the master contained in the Gospel.

4. How to Read Sacred Scripture?

What is the value of the approach to the Biblical text contained in *The Imitation of Christ* and what are its limits?

The author teaches using both specific advice and his own example (which is apparent thanks to the many allusions, phrases, and Biblical quotes) of the value of knowing Scripture as a tool for unity with the divine Author. In his view, only in the context of the desire for conversion (the change of one's life) going hand in hand with its guidelines for how to read sacred pages does this have a desirable meaning. Reading the Gospel is not enough; one must also have the "spirit of Christ." He teaches simplicity and humility in approaching Scripture. Meanwhile, sages whose wisdom pales in front of God can be conceited. The Word speaks only when the Lord speaks; Scripture requires one to listen. However, only the imitation of Christ and not reading Sacred Scripture itself gives a person full understanding of His words. Here, the Bible tries to be a tool for achieving mystical unity with God. "Oh God, Truth, make it so that I may be one with You in eternal love!" Everything that does not bring one closer to satisfying this desire is not worth the effort, while those who read Scripture for other purposes can be considered something like idolaters ("[t]hey have ears but do not hear" like the wooden and stone idols and those who make them – see: Psalms 115 : 4–9). Ephemeral truths (symbols and words) and knowledge understood as human truth are not universal. Only Christ's teaching is always universal and always relevant. Although many fragments of this handbook have a beautiful, compact, poetic construction, the author dissuades against focusing on form, instead recommending concentration only on the contents that can help the soul to achieve unity with God. "Simple and devout books" and "simple and profound" ones, authors who "are skilled or not in the art of writing;" might this advice not also refer to the books of Sacred Scripture, which differ greatly in terms of artistic value (for example, James and Judith verses John)?

On the other hand, however, one must concede that the spiritual horizon of this work does not approach certain important dimensions of the usefulness of knowledge of the Bible. There are many negative statements that narrow

the approach to Sacred Scripture. An analysis of the Biblical quotes used in this text show that the author focuses mostly on those that emphasize man's personal relationship with God. Martin Luther, who, after all, also came from the tradition of *devotionis modernae* also emphasized this subjective approach to the search for God and the existential dimension of faith in his teaching. Thomas à Kempis' style is similar to the Biblical style of the wisdom literature (for example, Sirach and Wisdom). In his view, reading a text is an individual activity. In fact, the "utilitarian" approach to the Biblical text is striking: "If you would profit from reading, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith..." Scripture is not a source of objective truths and metaphysical contents; one should not concentrate on its details. Instead, pure *praxis*, what is important to the Christian from the point of view of his or her spiritual development should be extracted from it. The ecclesial and liturgical contexts are not at all visible. All that there is is one's personal relationship with Christ, for which the Bible is at best a valuable food, even if it perhaps is more perfect than other "devout, exalted, and profound books."

Remembering these limitations, it is nonetheless worth returning to many guidelines contained in *The Imitation of Christ*, particularly the basic yearning that makes theology and Biblical exegesis something more than just one academic discipline: "O God, You Who are the truth, make me one with You in love everlasting. [...] Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me!"

Abstract

"The Imitation of Christ": Sacred Scripture in Spiritual Life

One of the most important classic devotional guidebooks, Thomas à Kempis' "The Imitation of Christ," presents to the reader an approach to Sacred Scripture and itself makes use of it. This article aims to deepen one's study of the theoretical and practical approach to the Bible in this work, analyzing five selected fragments in this respect.

Keywords: spirituality; Bible; Thomas à Kempis; sources of theology

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