

THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN  
*THE IMITATION OF CHRIST* BY  
 THOMAS A KEMPIS

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the use of Scripture in *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis. It discusses some of the conditions during the time of its appearance, focussing on the *Devotio Moderna* as reform movement, the life of Thomas. It then discusses the *Imitation* and its use of Scripture in detail.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a time of sharp contrasts. The Low Countries were affected by the plague, failed harvests and flooding. The Hundred Years' War, rivalries and tensions between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and rising nationalism, marked the growing complexity of human relations. The life of the church and the religiosity of the masses suffered under pressures from ecclesiastical taxes, simony, the secularisation of the clergy, the decline of the religious life, the dislocation of the hierarchy, conciliarism and the western schism.

But there were also signs of hope. From the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the poor of Christ (*pauperes Christi*) presented Christ through their personal poverty. They were themselves poor with the poor Christ. The women's movement (*mulieres religiosae* or Beguines) was closely linked with the monastic reforms of the Premonstratensians and the Cistercians. Spiritual and mystical texts were spread by the Carthusians who were hermits living in community. In the growing urban centres the mendicant friars presented a life of solidarity with the poor and marginal. Beguines and other mystics became heralds of Divine Love. The ecclesiastical decline called forth a need for a religious deepening that enabled the counter voices of the reforming synods to be heard.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Cf. Mens (1947), Simons (2001).

### 1.1 The *Devotio Moderna* as reform movement

Within this context we can see the *Devotio Moderna* as a reform movement that began in the region of the IJssel River and which spread through north-western Europe. This began through the initiative of Geert Grote<sup>3</sup> who exposed the abuses within the church and desired her inner renewal. The “Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life” stimulated a reflection on the Christian life and a renewal of religious life. They played an important role in the development of a new educational system, the articulation of the spiritual life, artistic representation and the development of a culture of reading and production of books. With them we see an initiative for the renewal of religious culture that was to influence all of Europe.

Certain central lines emerge within this whole. As was the case within many forms of religious community, the “common life” of the *Devotio Moderna* mirrored the first Christian community of Jerusalem: they were one in heart and soul and held everything in common. For the *Devotio Moderna* their common life was rooted in the community of love that is the Trinity. It is within this spiritual space that we as image of God participate, and from where we invite others to participate. This basic inspiration became a reality in various forms of devout religious life.

Books played an important role in Geert Grote’s understanding of reform. In this he was certainly influenced by the Carthusians. Books were the inheritance of the tradition. The Scriptures naturally occupied first place. The devout immersed themselves in the Vulgate and were committed to producing a Dutch translation. Grote translated a number of Psalms and Biblical passages in his *Book of Hours*. But it was not only the Bible that was read and spread. There were also other important works that were collected and copied by the devout. This editorial work provided an economic basis for the first communities of common life. But more importantly, it provided a source of meditation. As they copied, they selected sayings that were appropriate for meditation and for spiritual discussion.

3 Cf. *Gerardus Magnus* (2003), in particular Van Dijk (2003:9-629).

This consideration of the Scriptures was intended to achieve a profound identification with Jesus, especially in his suffering and death on the cross. We appropriate interiorly that on which we meditate. The life of Jesus, and especially his suffering, cannot remain something exterior but should be imprinted deep in the heart. The same is true of one's own sinfulness, death, the last judgement, the great deeds of God and the joy of heaven. The goal of this intimacy is union with God, as it is embodied in the example of Christ. The spirituality of the *Devotio Moderna* finds its best expression in the book *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 The life of Thomas a Kempis

Thomas lived from 1379/1380 to 1471. Thus, like the mystic Ruusbroec, he lived an exceptionally long life (90 years) for the Middle Ages. He was born in Kempen, 15 kilometres east of Venlo (i.e. at the present border between Germany and the Netherlands) in what was then the duchy of Gelder. He was called Thomas Hamerken, an honourable name for the son of a blacksmith. At the age of fourteen he went to study in Deventer where he met Florens Radewijnsz(oon), a kindred spirit of Geert Grote, who welcomed him into his house. After completing his study he entered the Augustinian canons in the monastery of the Agnietenberg near Zwolle. This monastery belonged to the congregation of Windesheim, the nearby centre of the *Devotio Moderna*. Thomas was professed after eight years (in 1407) and after another seven years (in 1414) was ordained a priest at the age of 34. Ten years later, in 1424, he was made novice master, a post that he held until the end of his life. He remained as a contemplative in this monastery of the Agnietenberg for his whole life. We get the impression of a calm, contemplative spirit who persevered in his concentration on the one thing necessary. Without pretension he kept his gaze fixed on God. The word career had no meaning for him, yet he became perhaps the most famous and most read spiritual writer of the Low Countries.

4 Cf. van Dijk (2003:1-2); Caspers (2003:5-8); Van den Berg (2003:9-29); Hofman (2003:30-42); Van Dijk (2003:43-92); Caspers (2003:93-124).

### 1.3 *The Imitation of Christ*

His book *The Imitation of Christ* consists of four parts (*libelli*) that were produced at intervals between 1420 and 1441 and eventually combined. Each of the four sections exposes a dimension of the spirituality of the *Devotio Moderna*. The first part situates itself in the tension between light and darkness and sees the monastery as the way to the light. The second part situates itself in the tension between God and humanity and shows how, through repentance, one opens oneself interiorly to receive God. In the third part this intimacy takes on concrete form in the event of communion. Finally, the fourth part revolves around the self-revelation of the Lord in the listening of the son.<sup>5</sup>

As novice master, Thomas was involved for decades in accompanying the younger brothers and the *Imitation* arose out of this long practice. Thus we listen to someone with expert experience. In the *Imitation* we can hear humour, typically Dutch common sense, and sharp psychological insight. Moreover, it is closely linked with the mystical tradition of the Low Countries. Dag Hammarskjöld, one of the great mystical writers of the twentieth century, always had this book with him and quoted from it on the day that he was chosen as secretary-general of the United Nations.

The treatise that we know as *The Imitation of Christ* has no common title for the four books. It simply begins with the title of the first book: *ammoniciones ad spiritualem vitam utiles*, or “Aids in the spiritual life”. The first word (*ammoniciones*; “hints, tips”) shows the character of the book that is intended as a work of spiritual accompaniment. This immediately raises the question of which aids or advice a spiritual accompanist is to give. What techniques or interventions is he to use? Are the hints that Thomas uses in his treatise handy tips for the jour-

5 Most editions of *The Imitation of Christ* place the fourth book before the third, and thus it concludes with the section on communion. Rudolf van Dijk (staff member of the Titus Brandsma Institute) has shown that this was not the original order and that the sections were probably later changed around as a result of the greater emphasis that came to be placed on Holy Communion. For Thomas the final piece is rather our *communio* with God, or our total transformation in God in which we come to live totally out of God, without turning in on ourselves. This is union with God and communion as a sacrament is the way to it.

ney, things that are useful to know when, for example, one needs to repair one's car? Or is he concerned with a totally different form of encouragement that, while it provides no ready-made solutions, can nevertheless give us direction in our search for our own spiritual way? Where ought we to aim our compass if we are really concerned with God?

If we are seekers of God, then we are compelled to discover his face in all aspects of our existence. The spiritual way demands neither flight from the world nor contempt for the self. The search for God is not in conflict with our involvement with people. There is no rivalry between God and humanity. We are people who have been touched by God and this experience penetrates the whole of our lives. We have been wounded by God and as a result of this we cannot live as "ordinary" people. A hole has been struck in us in that we are no longer our own possession. The Other has grasped hold of us and it is precisely this that has made us into people who are possessed, into seekers of God. At the same time we know how difficult it is to make this "being grasped by that which we ourselves cannot grasp" the starting point of our lives. We are repeatedly tempted to swap the invisible for the visible. In the chaos of the encounter with God we prefer the certain to the uncertain in order to reinstate our grasp on our way. We certainly want to follow God's way, but as we think God's way should go.

It is this tension between being really called by God and yet having the constant inclination towards temptation by our own ideas, wishes and longings, which is the real subject of *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas repeatedly encourages us to remain faithful to our original calling. This does not lie in the visible things that provide certainty and are able to be grasped, but rather in the invisible reality of God whom we can only learn to know through surrender to the experience of being possessed by God. The *ammoniciones* that Thomas a Kempis offers us are thus tools that enable us to let go of the world that binds us to ourselves, so that God can transform us. These *ammoniciones* describe the transition from the visible to the invisible and from the objectifiable to the intimacy that lies beyond human language, and thus they guide us with great precision on this way. This is a transition that we must repeatedly make anew. We never possess it.

## 2. THE IMITATION OF CHRIST AS PROGRESSIVE EXTERIORISATION OF SCRIPTURE

As a mystagogic document *The Imitation of Christ* introduces us to a vivid relationship with Scripture. In the tradition of monastic *lectio divina* the human person discovers the twisting roads of the spiritual journey in the meditative confrontation with Scripture. The text of Scripture does not give information about God's plan of salvation but attracts us until we give in to his working. Thomas a Kempis presents us with a collection of thoughts capable of transforming us little by little into total conformity with Christ, the perfect image of God. His book does not present a roadmap for the spiritual journey, but starts by introducing us to mystagogic reading of Scripture so that God himself may become our spiritual accompanist.

### 2.1 On the “representation” (“imitation”) of Christ and the disregard for the vanities of the world

The four treatises owe their common name to the title of the first chapter of the first book. Here Thomas simply indicates the content of the first chapter. The Latin term *imitatio* means “representation” or “imitation” and points to a process of interiorisation. To represent Christ means to take Christ on in such a way that one comprehends from within the extent to which he was possessed by God. The essence or the being of Christ cannot be seen in his exterior but lies rather in his transparency to God. By putting on the life of Christ in its outward form, we also begin to sense the extent to which both his — and our — life is intended to be lived directly from God.

We should distinguish two dynamics in the *Imitatio Christi* that are inextricably linked together. We know these already from the desert monks of early Christianity.<sup>6</sup> In the first place a desert mother or father had her or his working goal (*skopos*). Such a goal could have been to withdraw from the social structures of the period in order to be purified through silence and solitude. This working goal is thus found on the level of that which we can do. It is at this level that we find much of organised religious life: the common liturgy or prayer of the hours, the

6 Waaijman (2002:264-275).

structured silence and the following of the particular rules of an order or congregation. In the first place, the *Imitatio Christi* is also characterised by the taking on of Christ in the literal sense of the word. It is only by placing ourselves in the life of Christ and being conformed to him, that we can feel him from within. The working goal does not exist on its own but is aimed at the end goal (*telos*). We cannot reach this end goal through our own power, for it is aimed at that which comes to us from beyond. Thus the end goal is not the perfect imitation of the life of Christ, but rather becoming conscious that Christ or God forms the intimacy of our life. We do not transform ourselves; it is the power of Christ's love which transforms us from within.

In the title of the first chapter Thomas compares and contrasts two movements, namely the representation of Christ and the disregard for the vanities of the world (*contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi*). This is often seen as a negative attitude towards the world and created things. The world is seen as bad and we should therefore get as much distance from it as we can. As a result of this the life of the desert and forms of contemplative religious life were viewed as a withdrawal from the world. We leave the world in order to devote ourselves totally to God. The question, however, is whether this really occurs so easily. While we may think that by entering a contemplative order we have left the world, in reality our journey has just begun. To leave the world means to leave the world within us. This is to realise that it is not we who are at the centre of our lives, but rather God. Thomas does not speak of contempt for the world but rather of contempt for the vanities of the world. What are these vanities? Considering them in the light of the tensions mentioned above, we can see them as pertaining to our longing for security in visible and objectifiable reality. Instead of pursuing a relationship with the One who calls us from beyond to our divine reality, we make ourselves dependent on people or things who may offer us more security, but who are an illusion in the light of our calling. While possession may offer us the appearance of security, in reality it is nothing more than a façade behind which we attempt to protect our naked life. Francis of Assisi understood this well. In order to arrive at the reality of our calling, we need the original experience of receiving life "for nothing" from God's hand. Everything else — in which we think of ourselves as master of our lives and by which we establish our security — is the

vanity of the world. This vanity lives in each of us and is the fundamental tension of our life.

### 2.1.1 To meditate within the life of Christ

1. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness (Jn. 8:12), says the Lord.
2. With these words Christ urges us to make his life and actions our own, if we really desire to be enlightened and freed from all blindness.
3. Our highest application must therefore be to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ.

Thomas begins the first chapter with a quotation from John's Gospel followed by a commentary. According to Thomas, the darkness that John speaks of is not darkness in an objective sense of the word, but points rather to our blindness. We walk in darkness because our eyes have become insensitive to the divine light. Here Thomas indicates the root of our problem. Our point of departure is that through our concern for ourselves we have become trapped in ourselves. This is why we seek support and security in the trusted reality of the visible and the graspable. We do not see the extent to which God is the light of our eyes. Christ is the way that frees us from this blindness. By putting on Christ and submitting ourselves to his words, we are drawn out of the darkness and into the light. For Thomas it is Christ who is the mediator. It is through his words that one can be enlightened by God. But our will is also important if we are to allow ourselves to really be touched by the words of Christ. This means that we must see Christ not simply as the one who orders the outer structure of our life (*skopos*), but as the one who desires to bring us to the immediate life in which we live out of God (*telos*). By putting on the life of Christ we gradually become freed from ourselves and we come to realise that it is God himself who orders our life. Therefore Thomas concludes that our highest application must be to meditate within the life of Christ (3). Here he points to the life of Jesus as it comes to us through the Gospels. By means of a profound engagement with this life and by putting it on as our own life (*skopos*), we can come into contact with God's Spirit that moved him and that also moves us from within (*telos*).

## 2.1.2 Being conformed to Christ

4. The teaching of Christ surpasses that of the saints, and those who possess the spirit will find the hidden manna.
5. There are many who, despite frequent hearing of the gospel, have little desire for it, for they do not possess the spirit of Christ.
6. Those who wish to take in fully the words of Christ, must pattern their whole lives according to his.

As the title *Imitatio Christi* implies, this treatise of Thomas's has a strong Christo-centric orientation. The teaching of Christ is his point of departure. This is more important than that of any saint, who would in any case be orientated towards the teaching of Christ. Yet Thomas is not concerned with a number of verifiable laws or rules that we must follow, but rather with the spirit that speaks through them: those who possess the spirit will find the hidden manna (4). Reading the gospel is not purely an intellectual matter but is a form of concentration that brings us into contact with the divine. Thus the Christian tradition is familiar with *lectio divina* and the early monks spoke of ruminating (*ruminare*) on the Holy Scriptures. Only by repeated tasting will one taste the sweetness of God that transcends the words and desires to speak to us directly. Here we can apply the image of the church father, Jerome, who wrote that the reading of Holy Scripture is like the "hoisting of our sails for the Holy Spirit without knowing at which shore we will land."<sup>7</sup>

*Lectio divina* is a specific tradition of reading in which the accent is not so much on coming to know about the life of Jesus, but rather, as reader, on reaching the layer of one's deepest longings or calling. Thomas's critique was that, while the gospel, in material terms, was much read, little or no contact was made on the level of the spirit. The inner orientation of the gospel is geared to awakening the longings of the spirit. This demands of us as readers, that we yield to this natural dynamic of the gospel.

The full meaning of the words of Christ only becomes apparent when we apply ourselves to patterning our whole life according to his (6). It is also in this sense that we see the tension between the meaning that the words of Christ have in the gospel and the appeal that emerges

7 Commentaria in Ezechielem PL 25, 369D, cited in: Waaijman (2002:708).

from them. This address cannot be heard by the ear that listens to the objective content and cannot be grasped by our own logic. Yet at the same time this appeal constitutes the fullness of the gospel. Through it the gospel acquires flesh and blood and we are able to be animated by the same spirit that gave rise to it. This demands of us that we view the life of Jesus not simply as a nice painting on the wall. It is no mere picture for us to admire for, first and foremost, the life of Jesus forms the essence of our own life. By putting on Christ and being formed in his likeness (*skopos*), we can come to the realisation that the Spirit that moved him is the same Spirit that is active in us today (*telos*).

Thomas would not deny that the life of Jesus also functions as an example for us. Yet the primary aim of the gospel is to be found in the encounter with God. This situates our lives within a dynamic of love that is incomprehensible to our own logic. But it is neither devoid of logic nor purely emotional. Rather, it enlightens us with an immediate sense that unmask our self-definition as vanity. This ensures that the imitation of Christ is no blind obedience, but rather a form of contemplation that brings us into an ever-deeper contact with the truth of the gospel. The appeal of this truth lies beyond the words. It is the living spirit of the gospel that permeates the human order, but cannot be captured within this order.

### 2.1.3 The love of God

7. What use is your learned speech about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity?
8. Indeed, high-flown words do not make one holy and just, but a virtuous life is loved by God.
9. I would rather be struck than know how to define it.
10. What would it profit us to know the whole Bible and the teaching of all philosophers by heart if we were to live without grace and the love of God?

This primary attention to the workings of God on the spiritual way also forms the critical moment in the following paragraph in which Thomas contrasts pride and humility in a somewhat humorous way. One is proud when one places one's own insight above the reality that is at work in the relationship with God. We are not our own guides on the spiritual journey; instead it is contemplation that forms the com-

pass of our life. Rather than being some false form of self-humiliation, humility is a fundamental religious category that has to do with our willingness to be led. The proud think that they can grasp the world by means of their own logic, while those who are called by God know from experience that there is no other logic than the following of the trail of that by which they have been possessed.

The virtue that Thomas speaks of is therefore not a collection of properties that we can possess. We do not make ourselves virtuous but are made virtuous by God through our surrender to his power (*virtus*) that moves us from within.<sup>8</sup> Pride and humility indicate the field of tension in which our life is situated. Although we know that we are simply called to be obedient to the voice that possesses us, yet time and again we attempt to find our identity in the approval of others. We want to be “someone” who counts, yet we forget that before everything that we have and possess, we are a gift of God’s love. We are loved “for nothing” and we have to do nothing other than receive the fullness of this unconditional love into our lives.

The unconditionality of the love in which we are awakened to life is shocking because it shows us that we can do nothing of ourselves. The whole of our existence comes from God and nothing in us exists outside of God. This is the foundation of the religious experience that leads us to search for the Other. Therefore Thomas tells us: “I would rather be struck than know how to define it” (9). Without a real understanding that we are born in this “striking touch,” all our Christian, theological and philosophical words are empty and without meaning. We may have beautiful theories but they lack their foundation in experience. It is only through experience that our theories take on flesh and blood and thus our speech about God becomes a speech from our own encounter with God.

In the background to the closing sentence of this paragraph we can hear the first letter to the Corinthians: “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). “Having” the love of God is no possession in the normal sense of the word but it does have implications for our attitude to life. We

8 Cf. Blommestijn (1997:67-78).

can attempt to determine our life ourselves or we can yield to this encounter in the realisation that we live out of God's power. This last attitude to life is "eccentric" in that we do not live out of our own self-determination but are rather obedient to the voice of our soul which is love.

#### 2.1.4 Vanity of vanities

11. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity; all except to love God and to serve him alone.
12. This is the highest wisdom: to yearn for heavenly glory through disregard for the world.

With an allusion to the book of Proverbs, Thomas shows with a certain humour the relativity of everything that we pressure ourselves with: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity; all except to love God and serve him alone" (11). This sentence may sound negative to our ears. Is all that we do vanity? Does Thomas want to convert us into a sort of other-worldly people who are only concerned with God? The words "to love God and to serve him alone" (Dt. 6:13) not only forms one of the core sentences of the Torah, but is also seen as one of the most important commandments in the Gospels (Mt. 22:37; Mk. 12:30; Lk. 10:27). We should not understand this commandment in an exclusive sense. To love and serve God does not stand in opposition to the love and service of humanity, but rather indicates the eccentric attitude of this loving service. We serve God by surrendering to our soul's desire. In this God becomes visible as the love of our love and we serve him by living through his power. Thus loving God is an all-inclusive exclusivity. We love God by allowing the face of his unconditional love to gaze upon us and thus live immediately out of this stream of love. It is not we ourselves who are active; instead, in all that we do, we allow God's love to permeate our lives. This obedience to the love of God also influences the way in which we love our neighbour. In this love we love the other not as an object of our desire but from the deepest desire of the Other which is God. For Thomas everything that occurs outside of this love is vanity. The spiritual path is simply directed at losing oneself ever more in this love.

Thomas then returns to the theme of this chapter: the disregard for the world (12). The "world" is a symbol for an attitude in which we

clasp at the visible and verifiable as our only security. Concerned for ourselves and our vulnerable life, we build a wall of possessions around us in order to protect our nakedness. This is the logic of the world that is also found in us. But along with this concern for ourselves we are also moved by the deepest desire of our soul that emerges from the Encounter or Touch. This is the dynamic of the Spirit that makes us realise that the whole of created reality is permeated by a mystery that escapes the objectifying eye. Thomas refers to this as the yearning for heavenly glory (12). In our calling, we experience a deep desire that transcends our own neediness and which is directed at the divine mystery in everything. This does not mean that our calling is abstract; on the contrary, it demands decidedly concrete steps. We can feel called to caring for the sick, teaching and so on, but these activities should not concentrate on the purely material. This is not work for its own sake. Rather, we are touched in the work by the “soul” of the other and we desire only that he really comes to life.<sup>9</sup> This is seeing beyond the objectifiable and in this sense it is a yearning for heavenly glory. The accent in this line is therefore on the deepest desire of our calling (cf. Phil. 3:14). Thomas sees the *highest wisdom* (12) as consisting in allowing ourselves to be led by the fact that we are possessed by God. In this we let go more and more of our concern for ourselves.

### 2.1.5 The disregard for the vanities of the world

13. This is vanity: searching for transitory riches and placing your hope in them.
14. This too is vanity: to seek honour and social advancement.
15. Vanity is following the desires of the flesh and desiring that for which you must later be severely punished

What follows further elucidates the understanding of “vanity” (*vanitas*). In the first place vanity consists in searching for and trusting in material possessions: “This is vanity: searching for transitory riches and placing your hope in them” (13). The urge to possess runs in our human blood. Even groups that idealistically desire to possess nothing often make poverty into their own possession. To say that the accumulation of possessions is vanity should not be understood as a moral judge-

9 Cf. Blommestijn & Huls (1998).

ment. Possessions should not be rejected in themselves, but searching for them as our only security makes us rudderless, because this is motivated chiefly by fear. For possessions give us a feeling of safety, enabling us to think that we are in control of our lives. This need to cover ourselves against possible emergencies is understandable in terms of human logic, but it is at odds with our calling since it entails handing ourselves over to God and thereby losing control over our lives. Thomas calls the grasping for transitory riches “idle” because it ignores the only real certainty and riches that we have in life, namely God, who in love, has called us to life. It is in the unconditionality of this love that we know that we are really cared for by God. Our hope does not lie in material riches but in God who calls us and who will lead us to our essence.

Vanity consists, in the second place, of seeking our salvation in social status: “This too is vanity: to seek honour and social advancement” (14). The desire to be appreciated is an innate human need. A child needs appreciation in order to really grow into adulthood. A lack of such appreciation, or a feeling of being unwanted, becomes a deep wound that it will carry for its whole life. The need for the esteem of others also occupies an important role in adult life. We want to be someone in the eyes of the other. Even if we wanted to, it would be very difficult to let go of this deeply rooted yearning. What Thomas exposes is therefore not our human need to be valued, but rather a life that organises itself around this need, as if it were our only source of direction. To derive one’s identity from social honour and a high position in the social hierarchy is to make oneself very vulnerable. We are then dependent on the other in order to be someone. Without a solid grounding in ourselves, we flatter others in order to establish ourselves. Thomas calls such a life “vain” because through it we are trapped in a world that ultimately revolves around ourselves. As was the case with the urge to possess, the desire for appreciation is also rooted in fear. Our fear of falling out of favour with others makes us into their slaves. The dynamic of our calling stands in contrast to this. It is a movement in which we are pulled away from our concern with ourselves. By realising that we are loved by God above all else, we do not need to make ourselves dependant on the esteem of others. In the unconditionality of this love we do not need to do anything other than be who we are, and in this we may live out the deepest desire of our soul.

Vanity consists, in the third place, of following the desires of the flesh: “Vanity is following the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16) and desiring that for which you must later be severely punished” (15). As a spiritual accompanist Thomas wants to open our eyes to two competing orientations in our lives. Following Paul, the first orientation is called “the desires of the flesh”. The contrast between flesh and spirit resulted in a long history of hostility towards, and undervaluing of, the flesh in our culture. This was especially true of the area of sexuality, which was viewed with grave suspicion. Thus in our current language the expression “desires of the flesh” has predominantly sexual connotations. To give in to the desires of the flesh is virtually identical to giving free reign to our sexual urges. But for Paul, the desires of the flesh were something much broader. He was concerned with the desires that held us captive in ourselves and in our self-organisation. The logic of the flesh is the logic of self-preservation and ambition. This urge is a necessary human given. But when it becomes the dominant dynamic of our life we are, paradoxically, digging our own graves. Too concerned with our own lives, we do not dare to get in touch with the reality of our deepest desires, which is what Paul understands by living according to the Spirit. Here we are shown an attitude to life that — realising that God is the Life of our lives — lets go of the concern for ourselves in order to simply live out of God. Spiritual life is therefore not hostile to the body, but is rather a life that is concerned with the whole person. Both spirit and body are transformed through the logic of love in this simple life that is rooted in God. If we remain grasping at the logic of ambition and self-preservation, then we punish ourselves by cutting ourselves off from the Source that leads us to life.

#### 2.1.6 Vanity is to forget our true destiny

16. Vanity is to desire a long life and to have little concern for a good life.
17. Vanity is to only see the present life and not to provide for the future.
18. Vanity is to love that which passes quickly and not hasten towards that where eternal joy is to be found.

Next come three contrasts (16-18). The first is the contrast between a long and a good life: “Vanity is to desire a long life and to have little

concern for a good life” (16). Here too we see the distinction between a life that is rooted in our urge to survive (“to desire a long life”) and a life that has established itself in God (to desire “a good life”). Thomas does not view a good life in moral categories. We are not good because we dutifully abide by the rules. Rather our goodness consists in allowing God’s goodness to flow through us and allowing ourselves to be ever more carried along by this unconditional stream of love.

The second contrast is that between being orientated towards our present life, and being orientated towards that which is yet to come: “Vanity is to only see the present life and not to provide for the future” (17). Having strenuously insisted that we must let go of our concerns for ourselves in order to really live from God, Thomas now appears to say the opposite. The question, however, is what he means by “future” (*future*). Is he pointing us to a literal future time, or should we understand “future” eschatologically? In the latter case it is not about an objectively designated time, but rather points to the invisible working of God within time. Thus a contrast is made between those who totally orientate themselves towards the present in purely possessive terms, and those who view their lives as a divine mystery that addresses them from beyond, and that can only reach completion through obedience to this Voice.

The last contrast is that between the temporal and the eternal: “Vanity is to love that which passes quickly and not hasten towards that where eternal joy is to be found” (18). Just as the future was to be read in terms of the present in the previous contrast, so too eternity does not point to a reality within created time, but rather to the unobjectifiable moment of eternal creation. Just as our own lives are a divine mystery, so too, the whole of created reality is permeated by God’s eternity. Thomas does not say that as true ascetics we may not love the temporal, but rather that we should not be so attached to it that we lose our openness to the divine mystery within it. For example, when we love someone in order to avoid feeling our own aloneness, we make the other an object of our desire and he can no longer reveal himself in his divine otherness. We can, however, be so touched by the other that we feel that the love is concerned ultimately not with ourselves but with the other. In this case we do not rejoice in the nearness of the other, but in the divine birth in which the other really becomes what he is in God’s

eyes. Thus a distinction is made here between an attitude in which creation is seen purely as an instrument for our own goals, and an attitude in which we find our joy in the liberating power of God's work in creation.

With this discussion of vanity that finds its origin in the book of Proverbs, Thomas a Kempis provides us with a mirror in which our own ambiguity can be exposed. We want to be "someone" in the eyes of the other. At the same time we know that this material and social identity only touches the surface of our existence. Trapped in the patterns of expectation of the other, we cannot be who we really are in God's eyes and the more that we make ourselves dependent on the other, the more alienated we shall feel from our own being and our own soul. On closer inspection, self-concern and ambition are nothing more than a circle dance around ourselves. Out of fear of our own nakedness, we build an imposing wall around us, only to discover that we have become alienated from ourselves. For Thomas, the only way out of this is to recognise that this urge towards self-manifestation does not lead us anywhere. However much we may be cursed with it, it remains a hopeless or vain undertaking that is doomed from the start.

Is Thomas then a fatalist who simply wants to destroy all hope? On the contrary, he wants to protect us from a dead end. The last three contrasts also provide a perspective. Self-preservation and ambition are not the only motivating forces in humanity. Along with this fear for our own existence, there is also the kingdom of God. If we allow this divine reality to find a place in us, we realise that we are nothing in ourselves and that God is everything in us. We are the kiss of love of God and we live out of his unconditionality. We do not need to be anything more than we are and we establish ourselves in his eternal name. With this polar tension Thomas indicates the extremes within which the spiritual life occurs.

#### 2.1.7 Synthesis

19. Often remember this saying "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, just as the ear is never filled with hearing."
20. Apply yourselves therefore to letting go of your love for the visible and instead go over to the invisible things.
21. For those who follow their senses defile their consciences and lose God's favour.

The first chapter concludes with a number of counsels that speak to the reader directly. Here Thomas combines the theme of the *Imitatio Christi* with that of the disregard for the world. The putting on of the life of Christ does not stand alone, but is a precondition for coming into contact with the divine. By meditating on the life of Christ (3) and by taking his words to heart, we are able to penetrate to the Source from which Christ lived and acted. This is why Thomas tells us to often remember this saying: “The eye is not satisfied with seeing, just as the ear is never filled with hearing” (19). We often shut ourselves up in what we objectively see or hear. Thus we can read the Bible and dispute with each other over what it “is” that we read. For Thomas this is to miss the essence of the Scriptures; we become the seeing blind. While we certainly hear the words of the Scriptures, we are deaf to their unobjectifiable power. This power is that of the Spirit who speaks in the Scriptures but who cannot be captured in words. While the Scriptures may be old, the Spirit is not subject to the whims of time. Its speech is always new in the one who really listens. In this, Thomas shows us our fundamental blindness and deafness that explains our exchanging of the material for the spiritual. We prefer to grasp at the security of words than at the invisible reality out of which these words are spoken. To really hear and to really see, is to transcend the objective phenomenon. In this we no longer see the face of the other, but this person becomes the face of the infinity of God himself. We no longer hear the words of the other; instead we listen to the Mystery out of which he speaks. This contemplative hearing and seeing is insatiable and ever new.

In order to attach ourselves, like Christ, to the loving spirit of God, it is necessary to detach ourselves from all the attachments that bind us to the material reality. Thomas writes: “Apply yourselves therefore to letting go of your love for the visible and instead go over to the invisible things” (20). Detachment plays an important role in Christian tradition. Ascetic practices are designed to break our focus on the sensual and the material. But often this asceticism becomes an end in itself and we forget that it is an exercise to help us concentrate on what is really real. Just as a musician must study for months in order to perform a piece perfectly, so the Christian life also consists of certain exercises that must ultimately lead to perfection. The question is really how this process goes. Are we perfect when we can keep the rules perfectly?

Everyone knows that that is not what Christian life is about. The same is true of a musician. A concert is not a success simply because the notes are perfectly played, but rather because the musician has so mastered the piece that he forgets himself in the music. At that point it is the music that plays the musician and he becomes purely an instrument. In order to practise this difficult moment of transition “master classes” are given. Renowned musicians teach talented students to become so possessed by the music that they themselves are no longer present as one who controls. Here Thomas speaks in the same way about the moment of transition. We must detach our hearts from visible things in order to go over to the invisible things (*ad invisibilia te transferre*). Just as a top sportsman puts everything else aside in order to concentrate on sport, so too the lives of people who are possessed by Christ need a certain type of concentration in order to become free to the power of God’s work in them. Christian life is a life that is focused on encounter. In order to make this encounter possible we need to create free places in which we can be led along by the invisible voice of our soul. This is to follow Christ in the deepest way. Just as Christ lived purely out of God’s love, so we too are invited to let go of ourselves in this invisible stream of love.

The spiritual way can best be defined as growth towards simplicity or that which is essential — it is to surrender to the realisation that we are unconditionally loved by God. The resistance that threatens this way comes about mostly through our lack of trust. We do not dare to accept the starting point that we are loved as we are and that we do not need to do anything to earn this love. Instead we seek security in ourselves and we exchange the invisible for the visible. For Thomas this is the dynamic of sensuality or the dynamic of the flesh, in which we place ourselves safely in contrast to the other. In this duplicity we lose our simplicity. As he writes in the conclusion to the first chapter: “For those who follow their senses defile their consciences and lose God’s favour” (21). God does not punish us when we allow ourselves to be led by self-preservation and ambition, but in our efforts to control our own lives we close ourselves off to the unconditionality of God’s love and her transforming work can no longer reach us. This is why Thomas views the following of our senses as the defiling of our conscience. By trying to control our lives ourselves, we deny the truth that

it is not us who stand at the centre of our lives, but rather God himself who is our life.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As a real mystagogue, Thomas a Kempis accompanies us in the reading of the *Imitation of Christ* towards a mystagogic use of Scripture. Through *lectio divina* we are gradually transformed in the modalities of the divine life, if we are ready to receive in contemplation the Word of God addressing us personally. Both Scripture and mystical texts have to be read in a mystagogic way in order to function as they are meant to. The reading, meditation, contemplation and orative interiorisation by the readers belong to the process of their construction as texts.

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