

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE IMITATION  
OF CHRIST

Thomas à Kempis

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE IMITATION OF

# Christ

*as written by* THOMAS À KEMPIS  
*and decorated by* VALENTI ANGELO



LIVING BOOK PRESS

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TO THE REV. CRAUFURD TAIT.

My Dear Craufurd.

I write this on the evening of the day on which, I believe, you have made a good profession before many witnesses, and bound yourself by a solemn vow to the Lord.

With deep affection, and with many grateful and sacred memories, I offer you this volume. May the Spirit which inspired its author six hundred years ago continually inspire you, and the Church of which you are now an ordained servant; and may He enable you, as a scribe instructed unto the Kingdom of God, to bring forth out of your treasures things new and old.

MARGATE,  
Second Sunday in Lent, 1874.

## PREFACE

The authorship of the following treatise is commonly attributed to Thomas Kempis. There seems no doubt that this must be a mistake, but it will not be out of place to begin with some account of him.

Thomas Hemercker was born at Kempen, near Köln, about the year 1380. His father was a labouring man, and his mother the village schoolmistress. At twelve years old he was sent to a religious community at Deventer called "The Brothers of Common Life," and there studied grammar and plain chant. In 1399 he entered as a novice among the canons regular of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwoll, where his brother was prior. In 1406 he made his profession, as appears from the following entry in the chronicle of the monastery:—"MCCCCVI in die Sacramenti investiti sunt duo fratres, Thomas Hemercker de Kempis civitate, dioecesis Coloniensis, germanus fratris Johannis Kempen, primi prioris quorum pater Johannes, mater Gertrudis vocabatur." The special work to which he applied himself was transcription of MSS. He copied the Bible, the Missal, the works of St. Bernard. He was employed fifteen years in transcribing a Bible in four vols., folio, which Rosweide saw in the library of the canons regular of Köln, with the following note which Kempis had appended:—"Finitus et completus Anno Domini MCCCCXXXIX per manus fratris Thomae Kempis." He then began copying some pious and ascetic treatises, among them the *Imitatio Christi*. To this he appended the same note as that at the end of the Bible, and thence arose the erroneous notion that he was its author, a notion which would be spread far and wide by the first printed editions. He died in 1471.

The work has also been attributed to John Gerson the famous Chancellor of the University of Paris, who took so praiseworthy

a part at the period of the civil wars of Burgundy and Orleans, and whose influence was so mighty at the Councils of Pisa and Constance. In consequence of the persecution which he suffered from the party of Burgundy he retired to Bavaria, and there wrote his *De Consolatione Theologicae*, in imitation of Boethius. He died in 1429, at the age of sixty-six. The *Imitatio* has been attributed to him in consequence of some old copies bearing the name of John Gersen as the author. The first of these, printed at Köln in 1488, is headed thus:—“*Incipit liber primus Johannis Gersen de Imitatione Christi de contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi.*” A list of twenty-four such copies lies before me.<sup>1</sup> And it has been hastily concluded that the “Gersen” here spoken of must be the Chancellor. Dean Milman rejects the opinion that he was the author on internal grounds (Lat. Chr. VI 304, n.) But external evidence is equally conclusive against him.

*In a family diary kept by the Count Gustavus de Advocatis of Biella in the years 1345—1349, occurs the following passage (which is copied literally), under February 1349:—“15<sup>o</sup> Die Dominica mensis Februarji post divisionem factam cum fratre meo Vincentio qui Ceridonji<sup>2</sup> abitat in signum fraterni amoris quod hoc temporalibus tantum impulsus negotis feci dono ili preciosum Codicem de Imitatione Christi, quod hoc ab agnatis meis longa manu teneo nam nonnulli antenates mei hujus jam recordarunt.”*

Here we have it stated that a copy of the *Imitatio Christi* has been for successive generations before 1349 in the possession of the family De Advocatis. If this work be identical with that before us, there is an end at once both of the Kempis and the Chancellor Gerson authorship. And we shall now show that there is a strong case in favour of the identity.

The family De Advocatis (Ital. Avogadro) owed their family

1 See *Essays on Universal Education*; by a monk of St. Augustine’s, Ramsgate [Rev. D. A. Hamilton]. Washbourne, 1873.

2 Ceridon, or Cerione, a village which since the fourteenth century belonged to the De Advocatis family.

name to having held the office of “Defenders of the Church” from the seventh century. Many members of it became illustrious in theology and science, and several became Bishops of Vercelli, the family being patrons of the church there.

In 1830, the Chevalier de Gregory, who had previously written a *Mémoire sur le véritable Auteur de l’Imitation*, made a remarkable confirmatory discovery. M. Techener, a bookseller in Paris, knowing his interest in the subject, showed him a MS. of the *Imitatio* of the thirteenth or fourteenth century which he had bought of an Italian. On the inside of the wooden binding M. de Gregory found the following autograph signatures:—

1550. 3 Maii. *Ad usum Dom-Hieronymi de Advocatis, civis Ypo-rediae [Ivrea].*

*Ad usum quoque Paracliti.*<sup>3</sup>

*Ad usum Hieronymi, Federici Advocatis Ceridoni, scripsi, 1568 4 die Maii.*

*Ad usum Hieronymi Advocatis.*

This MS. was carefully examined by experts and its age attested, and the individuals mentioned were all traced and identified as members of the Avogadro family who had lived in or near Vercelli.

We may now, I cannot but think, take it as proved that this book was in existence in the thirteenth century. We have also the evidence above referred to that it was the work of John Gersen. Who was he? The edition of De Sessa, printed at Venice in 1501, has its heading like that of Köln, quoted above. But in St. Catherine’s Abbey at Genoa, the Benedictine Cajetan (1560—1650) found a copy with this MS. note appended:—“*Hunc librum non compilavit Johannes Gersen, sed D. Johannes abbas Vercellensis, ut habetur usque hodie propria manu scriptus in eadem abbazia.*” Here it seems to be implied that the author was not the Chancellor Gerson, but an “Abbot John,” whose surname is not given. But

3 “Spirito” was not an unusual name in the Avogadro family.

this Abbot John was also surnamed Gersen, as appears from the *Codex Aronensis*, a MS. of the fourteenth century, discovered by the Jesuit Father Rosignoli three hundred years ago at Arona. It begins thus:—“*Incipiunt capitula primi libri Abbatis Joannis Gersen de Imitatione Christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi,*” and ends thus:—“*Explicit liber quartus et ultimus Abbatis Joannis Gersen de Sacramento Altaris.*” Three other MSS. of the same century, and many of the fifteenth, thirteen in all, have the same beginning. Another of the fifteenth calls the writer “Johannes de Canabaco,” (Ital. Cavaglià), and another has a picture of the writer as a Benedictine, which we need hardly say the Chancellor Gerson was not, and the Abbot of Vercelli was. Taking all these circumstances into account, there seems strong reason for accepting the belief that the writer of the *Imitatio* was John Gersen, who is called John of Cavaglià, and that he was an Abbot of Vercelli. But when we seek to investigate further, it must be confessed that our ground becomes somewhat uncertain. Cavaglià is a village near Vercelli, formerly subject to the temporal jurisdiction of the Abbot there, and it is said that a tradition lingers among the villagers that a certain John Gersen, a native of the place, was once Abbot of St. Stephen’s at Vercelli, and died in the odour of sanctity. A spot connected with his boyhood is pointed out. The Gersen family has survived in Cavaglià to this day.

The Benedictine Abbey of St. Stephen’s at Vercelli was founded at the beginning of the ninth century, and after some vicissitudes of fortune became very magnificent, and the feudal jurisdiction of its Abbot, who was among the three representatives of the republic of Vercelli, was greatly extended. In 1581 the monastery was suppressed by Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy, who was Lord of Vercelli.

In the great struggle between the Italians and the House of Hohenstaufen, the abbey, as was natural, played a conspicuous part. In the Second Lombard League, formed in 1225 against

Frederic II, the republic of Vercelli was represented by the Bishop, the Abbot of St. Stephen's, and a lay representative of the citizens; and the Abbot of St. Stephen's who signed his name was an Abbot *John*. The time, and the absence of any other Johns among the Abbots, as far as the lists exist, led the advocates of the Gersen authorship to give this Abbot John the honour.

Whoever the author may be, he has produced the most popular religious work in Christendom. In England alone the *Pilgrim's Progress* surpasses it, but even here the *Imitatio* stands second. For though the book in certain parts speaks for itself as being the work of a monk, it also speaks, not here and there, but throughout, the passionate eagerness of a soul to know God. The monkish habit is but the accident, the heart which beats beneath is impatient of everything external, in its aspirations to acquaint itself with God and be at peace. Exemplary ecclesiastic as no doubt the writer was, he ignores all outward ceremonies, save frequent Communions, in following the longings and feelings of his heart. He works out his own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing his own frailty, his own worthlessness, and need of divine grace. His confession is made to his own soul, and he asks for no earthly mediator to unite him to his Lord. As his name indicates that he was of the same race as Luther, so does his book anticipate the dawnings of the great Reformer's theology. His soul lives in a solitude, sometimes fearing, but oftener hoping, beneath the eye of God. "He feels he was not made to die," because he has found God to be the source and the end of his being. Thought, feeling, will, affection—all move round Him.

Milman stands, as far as I know, alone in the unfavourable judgment which he has formed upon this book. After describing it as the last effort of Latin Christianity, he pronounces it to be absolutely selfish in its aim. "Its sole, single, exclusive object, is the purification, the elevation of the individual soul, of the man absolutely isolated from his kind, of the man dwelling alone in

the solitude, in the hermitage of his own thoughts; with no fears or hopes, no sympathies of our common nature; he has absolutely withdrawn and secluded himself not only from the cares, the sins, the trials, but from the duties, the connections, the moral and religious fate of the world.” The title itself is a “glaring misnomer.” “That which distinguishes Christ, that which distinguishes Christ’s Apostles, that which distinguishes Christ’s religion—the Love of Man—is entirely and absolutely left out. Had this been the whole of Christianity, our Lord Himself (with reverence be it said) had lived, like an Essene, working out or displaying His own sinless perfection by the Dead Sea; neither on the Mount, nor in the Temple, nor even on the Cross. . . .”

“Christianity had been without any exquisite precept for the purity, the happiness of social or domestic life; without self-sacrifice for the good of others; without the higher Christian patriotism, devotion or evangelic principles to the public weal; without even the devotion of the missionary for the dissemination of Gospel truth; without the humbler and gentler daily self-sacrifice for relatives, for the wife, the parent, the child. Christianity had never soared to be the civiliser of the world. ‘Let the world perish, so the single soul can escape on its solitary plank from the general wreck,’ such had been its final axiom. The *Imitation of Christ* begins in self—terminates in self. The simple exemplary sentence, ‘He went about doing good,’ is wanting in the monastic gospel of this pious zealot. Of feeding the hungry, of clothing the naked, of visiting the prisoner, even of preaching, there is profound, total silence.”

No doubt this omission of the social aspect of Christianity is a characteristic of the book. But it does not prelude that aspect, and is not incompatible with it. There is nothing to indicate that the writer was neglectful of the active duties of his profession, and if we assume that he devoted himself to the works of mercy which he was called upon by his vows to do, those who have to work

hardest by sickbeds and in haunts of sin will best appreciate how great was his need of the retired and silent hours of which this book bears witness. In the history of that Divine Life to which the Dean makes reference, we are told that in the midst of His toils He went aside into a mountain and continued all night in prayer unto God. The life of activity was sustained and nourished by the life of inner communion. Therefore it is useless to condemn the book before us on the ground that it is contemplative and unpractical. The love with which it is still regarded is its best defence. "*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*" I could name more than one contemporary to whom I have known it to be dear. It was one of the favourite books of the unselfish, hardworking, all-sympathising, Frederick Maurice, and the references to it by some of the most powerful of living secular writers show how strong a hold it has upon their affections.

That other aspect of Christianity is of course equally true which bids us remember that we are members of a family, Englishmen, brethren. It is the aspect upon which the popular theology of our day almost exclusively dwells. And doubtless this belief is the only effective instrument which we shall find to counteract the social evils that afflict us. But if we would not be conquered by the world that we are seeking to conquer, we must study daily the Conqueror in His meekness, His perfectness and beauty, His world-embracing redemption, His sacramental grace, His twofold nature. And in the hope that this copy may help some Christian brother thus to find him, I now put from me this labour of love.

BOOK ONE

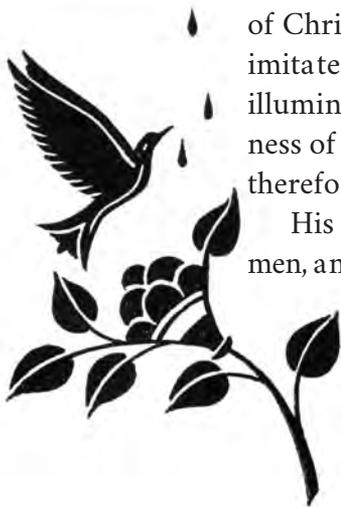


ADMONITIONS  
PROFITABLE FOR  
THE SPIRITUAL  
LIFE



“Whoever that followeth me shall not walk in darkness,”<sup>4</sup> saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ; and they teach us how far we must imitate His life and character, if we seek true illumination, and deliverance from all blindness of heart. Let it be our most earnest study, therefore, to dwell upon the life of Jesus Christ.

His teaching surpasseth all teaching of holy men, and such as have His Spirit find therein “the hidden manna.”<sup>5</sup> But there are many who, though they frequently hear the Gospel, yet feel but little longing after it, because they have not the mind of



4 John 8:12.  
5 Revelation 2:17.

Christ. He, therefore, that will fully and with true wisdom understand the words of Christ, let him strive to conform his whole life to that mind of Christ.

What doth it profit thee to enter into deep discussion concerning the Holy Trinity, if thou lack humility, and be thus displeasing to the Trinity? For verily it is not deep words that make a man holy and upright; it is a good life which maketh a man dear to God. I had rather feel contrition than be skilful in the definition thereof. If thou knewest the whole Bible, and the sayings of all the philosophers, what should all this profit thee without the love and grace of God? “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” save to love God, and Him only to serve. That is the highest wisdom, to cast the world behind us, and to reach forward to the heavenly kingdom.

It is vanity then to seek after, and to trust in, the riches that shall perish. It is vanity, too, to covet honours, and to lift up ourselves on high. It is vanity to follow the desires of the flesh and be led by them, for this shall bring misery at the last. It is vanity to desire a long life, and to have little care for a good life. It is vanity to take thought only for the life which now is, and not to look forward to the things which shall be hereafter. It is vanity to love that which quickly passeth away, and not to hasten where eternal joy abideth.

Be oftentimes mindful of the saying,<sup>6</sup> “The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing.” Strive, therefore, to turn away thy heart from the love of the things that are seen, and to set it upon the things that are not seen. For they who follow after their own fleshly lusts, defile the conscience, and destroy the grace of God.

6 Ecclesiastes 1:8.

## 2. OF THINKING HUMBLY OF ONESELF.

**T**here is naturally in every man a desire to know, but what profiteth knowledge without the fear of God? Better of a surety is a lowly peasant who serveth God, than a proud philosopher who watcheth the stars and neglecteth the knowledge of himself. He who knoweth himself well is vile in his own sight; neither regardeth he the praises of men. If I knew all the things that are in the world, and were not in charity, what should it help me before God, who is to judge me according to my deeds?

Rest from inordinate desire of knowledge, for therein is found much distraction and deceit. Those who have knowledge desire to appear learned, and to be called wise. Many things there are to know which profiteth little or nothing to the soul. And foolish out of measure is he who attendeth upon other things rather than those which serve to his soul's health. Many words satisfy not the soul, but a good life refresheth the mind, and a pure conscience giveth great confidence towards God.

The greater and more complete thy knowledge, the more severely shalt thou be judged, unless thou hast lived holily. Therefore be not lifted up by any skill or knowledge that thou hast; but rather fear concerning the knowledge which is given to thee. If it seemeth to thee that thou knowest many things, and understandest them well, know also that there are many more things which thou knowest not. "Be not high-minded," but rather confess thine ignorance. Why desirest thou to lift thyself above another, when there are found many more learned and more skilled in the Scripture than thou? If thou wilt know and learn anything with profit, love to be thyself unknown and to be counted for nothing.

That is the highest and most profitable lesson, when a man truly knoweth and judgeth lowly of himself. To account nothing of one's self, and to think always kindly and highly of others, this is great and perfect wisdom. Even shouldst thou see thy neighbor sin openly or grievously, yet thou oughtest not to reckon thyself

better than he, for thou knowest not how long thou shalt keep thine integrity. All of us are weak and frail; hold thou no man more frail than thyself.

### 3. OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH.

**H**appy is the man whom Truth by itself doth teach, not by figures and transient words, but as it is in itself.<sup>7</sup> Our own judgment and feelings often deceive us, and we discern but little of the truth. What doth it profit to argue about hidden and dark things, concerning which we shall not be even reprov'd in the judgment, because we knew them not? Oh, grievous folly, to neglect the things which are profitable and necessary, and to give our minds to things which are curious and hurtful! Having eyes, we see not.

And what have we to do with talk about genus and species! He to whom the Eternal Word speaketh is free from multiplied questionings. From this One Word are all things, and all things speak of Him; and this is the Beginning which also speaketh unto us.<sup>8</sup> No man without Him understandeth or rightly judgeth. The man to whom all things are one, who bringeth all things to one, who seeth all things in one, he is able to remain steadfast of spirit, and at rest in God. O God, who art the Truth, make me one with Thee in everlasting love. It wearieth me oftentimes to read and listen to many things; in Thee is all that I wish for and desire. Let all the doctors hold their peace; let all creation keep silence before Thee: speak Thou alone to me.

The more a man hath unity and simplicity in himself, the more things and the deeper things he understandeth; and that without labour, because he receiveth the light of understanding from above. The spirit which is pure, sincere, and steadfast, is

7 Psalm 94:12; Numbers 12:8.

8 John 8:25 (Vulg.).

not distracted though it hath many works to do, because it doth all things to the honour of God, and striveth to be free from all thoughts of self-seeking. Who is so full of hindrance and annoyance to thee as thine own undisciplined heart? A man who is good and devout arrangeth beforehand within his own heart the works which he hath to do abroad; and so is not drawn away by the desires of his evil will, but subjecteth everything to the judgment of right reason. Who hath a harder battle to fight than he who striveth for self-mastery? And this should be our endeavour, even to master self, and thus daily to grow stronger than self, and go on unto perfection.

All perfection hath some imperfection joined to it in this life, and all our power of sight is not without some darkness. A lowly knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than the deep searching of man's learning. Not that learning is to be blamed, nor the taking account of anything that is good; but a good conscience and a holy life is better than all. And because many seek knowledge rather than good living, therefore they go astray, and bear little or no fruit.

O if they would give that diligence to the rooting out of vice and the planting of virtue which they give unto vain questionings: there had not been so many evil doings and stumbling-blocks among the laity, nor such ill living among houses of religion. Of a surety, at the Day of Judgment it will be demanded of us, not what we have read, but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how holily we have lived. Tell me, where now are all those masters and teachers, whom thou knewest well, whilst they were yet with you, and flourished in learning? Their stalls are now filled by others, who perhaps never have one thought concerning them. Whilst they lived they seemed to be somewhat, but now no one speaks of them.

Oh how quickly passeth the glory of the world away! Would that their life and knowledge had agreed together! For then would

they have read and inquired unto good purpose. How many perish through empty learning in this world, who care little for serving God. And because they love to be great more than to be humble, therefore they “have become vain in their imaginations.” He only is truly great, who hath great charity. He is truly great who deemeth himself small, and counteth all height of honour as nothing. He is the truly wise man, who counteth all earthly things as dung that he may win Christ. And he is the truly learned man, who doeth the will of God, and forsaketh his own will.

#### 4. OF PRUDENCE IN ACTION.

**W**e must not trust every word of others or feeling within ourselves, but cautiously and patiently try the matter, whether it be of God. Unhappily we are so weak that we find it easier to believe and speak evil of others, rather than good. But they that are perfect, do not give ready heed to every news-bearer, for they know man’s weakness that it is prone to evil and unstable in words.

This is great wisdom, not to be hasty in action, or stubborn in our own opinions. A part of this wisdom also is not to believe every word we hear, nor to tell others all that we hear, even though we believe it. Take counsel with a man who is wise and of a good conscience; and seek to be instructed by one better than thyself, rather than to follow thine own inventions. A good life maketh a man wise toward God, and giveth him experience in many things. The more humble a man is in himself, and the more obedient towards God, the wiser will he be in all things, and the more shall his soul be at peace.

