

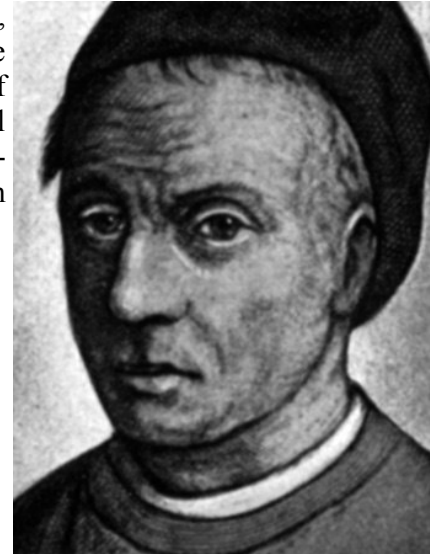
The Imitation of Christ

A Classic of Christian Contemplation

by Father Anthony Holder

For nearly six hundred years and written in numerous translations, the book - *The Imitation of Christ* has been viewed as probably the most widely read spiritual book in the world with the exception of the bible. Though its' authorship has been disputed, most will still attribute the book to the German Augustinian monk, Thomas à Kempis. Although the book has been a classic of Christian contemplation for so many years, yet it has much value for us in today's world.

The book, a devotional and instruction manual, assists us in our pursuit of holiness, communion with God and teaches us that Christ is the true model for all humanity. True to its title, the book primarily deals with how one should imitate and submit oneself to Christ. As a means of effectively portraying his ideas, Thomas à Kempis uses a dialogue format between Christ and a disciple. The book gives guidance on reading the scriptures, advice for obedience to authority, statements about adversity and how to avoid worldly vanities, counsel on how to overcome temptation. It contains eternal truths, reflections about death, judgment, and the offering of Christ on the Cross for us.



Thomas à Kempis (c.1380-1471)

The *Imitation of Christ* is divided into four sections or books.

The first section (Book 1) deals with thoughts and admonitions that are beneficial for one's spiritual life. The section discusses how an individual can free him/herself from worldly concerns and prepare for a spiritual life. Thomas à Kempis outlines that we are to be "zealous" in bringing our lives into conformity with that of Christ and that it is vanity to seek and love riches, to hope for a long life instead of a good life and to think only about now and not the future. He advises in the conclusion of this first section that admonishing oneself is necessary.

Book 2 gives guidance and reprove concerning one's inner life, a life that should be devotional. It warns us to be aware of the shortcomings in ourselves before pointing out the limitations in others – "It would be more just to accuse yourself and excuse your brother" (69). In this section we are called to train our inner self to be of service to Christ and to display a love of and a close friendship to Christ.

The third book, the longest of the four sections, focuses on inward consolation and conversation between Christ and those who earnestly follow him. Prayers have been interspersed throughout this section as a means of supporting those who are seeking to be Christ-like. The fourth section (Book 4) is an invitation to Holy Communion (the Sacrament of the Altar) and its place in a devout life. Thomas examines the Eucharist, making recommendations for how the individual is to receive Holy Communion in a reverent and devout manner. He concludes that through careful preparation, pure thought and hard work at patience and humility one can effectively use the Eucharist to become one with Christ and the Father.

I believe that although the book is aimed at those who are involved in an ascetical, monastic life, yet, those who are actively involved in the world need, even more, to read and re-read this book, preferably in segments, as an inspiration and guide to spiritual aspiration. The theme of humility, a trait attributed to Christ, is featured throughout the book and such humility is exercised towards God and humanity. Thomas à Kempis believes that humility is the secret of excellence. The popularity of this book, among Christians, may rest in its emphasis of direct communion with him and God. *The Imitation of Christ* is an essential book which all Christians should have as they seek to follow the example of Christ and to live out His will.