



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## The Imitation of Christ

by **Father Thomas à Kempis**  
of the Canons Regular of Mount St. Agnes  
(1380 - 1471)

### A STUDY

*The following pages are dedicated to the Little Hearts entrusted by God  
to Cloistered Poor Clare Colettine Nuns*

## CHAPTER 2

### Having a Humble Opinion of Self

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#### ***Sister's Commentary:***

*"EVERY man naturally desires knowledge; but what good is knowledge without fear of God? Indeed a humble rustic who serves God is better than a proud intellectual who neglects his soul to study the course of the stars. He who knows himself well becomes mean in his own eyes and is not happy when praised by men.*

*If I knew all things in the world and had not charity, what would it profit me before God Who will judge me by my deeds?*

*Shun too great a desire for knowledge, for in it there is much fretting and delusion. Intellectuals like to appear learned and to be called wise. Yet there are many things the knowledge of which does little or no good to the soul, and he who concerns himself about other things than those which lead to salvation is very unwise."*

## I.

**T**he touchstone here concerns our motivation for wanting to learn. Do we wish to do so simply to grow in knowledge, as though knowledge itself were an *end* and not a *means* to a far greater purpose?

If we consider ourselves carefully and truthfully, we find that all of us are possessed of much *useless knowledge*; knowledge that benefits no one --- ourselves included --- and that we never apply for the good and service of others.

Our use of the Internet is a prime example of this. At the end of a given day, after much desultory exploring and cursory reading we often find that we are unable to recall much of what we had read. It piqued our interest for the moment and we followed increasingly unrelated links until we are unable to recall the point at which we started. We had read much, but retained little. Most of our reading was nothing more than idle curiosity. We gather fragments of facts that tomorrow we no longer remember and have no need to recall. How has it profited us? In reality it has been little more than momentary "entertainment" to while away hours better spent knowing God. It is unlikely on your death bed that you will recall, or wish to recall, the latest folly or fortune of the present day's idolized "entertainer". Indeed, perhaps his or her death will have preceded your own.

We are so promiscuous and often utterly indiscriminate in what we expose our minds to. To what end? Instead, let us resolve to be wiser and far more selective of what we expose our minds and hearts to, seeking that which leads us deeper into God, that which promotes our love for others ... Is there a greater end, a more pressing purpose? This very night is not guaranteed to you, let alone tomorrow.

We must equally be aware of that inverted snobbishness which culls knowledge simply to feed our sense of intellectual grandeur, most often cultivated to assert our "superiority" over others "of less learning". How often such people seek any opportunity afforded them to display their "intellectual superiority" at the expense of the humble! Their "knowledge" is acquired solely to promote themselves ... which is impossible without simultaneously "demoting" others. It is the aggrandizement of the self. And more often than not, they know it ... too.

The knowledge we stand in direst need of is that which makes us grow in love for God and his kingdom ...

What was the knowledge that Mary the Mother of God was possessed of ? That which was born of an intimate love of her Son Jesus Christ, and of the Scriptures. This is true wisdom, true knowledge, for it leads us to divine truth. Let us, then, humbly ask Mary to lead us deeper into the truths of God.

*Your Little Sisters in Christ*

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## II.

*"Many words do not satisfy the soul; but a good life eases the mind and a clean conscience inspires great trust in God.*

*The more you know and the better you understand, the more severely will you be judged, unless your life is also the more holy. Do not be proud, therefore, because of your learning or skill. Rather, fear because of the talent given you. If you think you know many things and understand them well enough, realize at the same time that there is much you do not know. Hence, do not affect wisdom, but admit your ignorance. Why prefer yourself to anyone else when many are more learned, more cultured than you."*

**W**hen we over-eat, when we over-indulge in food consumption, no matter how delectable the food, we do not feel well. We do not feel any benefit of having over-consumed. Quite to the contrary we may feel most unwell! The food, good in itself, has been abused. It is exactly the same with intellectual and spiritual food. If we over-indulge in absorbing words, we fail to benefit from of the message, and find ourselves with the dissatisfying feeling of having learned nothing.

Look, instead, to the example of Mary!

How few of her words are recorded in the Gospels, how sparingly she speaks, and yet in little we are profoundly lead us to Christ, and to a deeper understanding of Christ.

Likewise, it is far better for us to look within the silence of our hearts and see where we can grow in our love for God and in the charitable service of others. We are not wanting in words; the challenge is to put them into practice. If, in fact, we are gifted by God with the capacity for great learning, it should be used for the service and good of others. There is nothing to be *proud* about --- it is a gift from the "Giver of all good things."<sup>1</sup>, rather we have a responsibility to communicate the good. If we are really honest, the sum of all that we know (or think we know) of God is as nothing compared to His greatness and grandeur, and that is a wonderful realization, that He is inexhaustible beauty and mystery! If we are acquainted with people knowing far more than we do, then let us praise God for His gift and pray for those persons that they use their gifts fruitfully for the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> St. James 1.17

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### III.

*"If you wish to learn and appreciate something worth while, then love to be unknown and considered as nothing. Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel. To think of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others is the best and most perfect wisdom. Wherefore, if you see another sin openly or commit a serious crime, do not consider yourself better, for you do not know how long you can remain in good estate. All men are frail, but you must admit that none is more frail than yourself. "*

**T**here is such a beauty, such a blessed reward in being hidden, hidden with Christ in God. This is the ideal of the contemplative life, but also much of our intimacy with, and love for God --- whatever our state in life --- is *hidden* inasmuch as it consists in what passes between two lovers: God and the soul. That sublime and mutual love is experienced, lived, enacted, in the most secret chambers of the heart, chambers around which an impenetrable curtain is drawn between this mutual exchange of love, and the world. This is the hidden life, and how zealously that chamber is guarded by the Groom!

Genuine self-knowledge always leads to humility. In the deepest moments of introspection we behold ourselves in far greater authenticity than the carefully manipulated image that we present to the world. The world we can deceive, even as the world deceives us. But in the stillness of our heart we behold what *God* beholds! Nothing is hidden from God, and here, in our last refuge from the world, nothing is hidden from us. Pretensions, appearances, lies --- with which we deceive the world --- one and all fall away, and cannot deceive us! In this sense, here, in this life, as Saint Paul promises in the Life to come, "we *know* even as we are known".<sup>1</sup> With authentic knowledge of all that we really are, and really are not, ineluctably comes humility which proceeds from apprehending the truth.

In the Epistle of St John we are admonished that, if we see our brother sin, we are to pray for him and the sinner will receive life! How different from the satisfaction that some receive upon learning of the sin of another! To relish another's fall into sin --- is to sin more grievously still, for we share in the delight of demons!

We are not to be judges, but lovers! Each and every person is created in the image of God and thus worthy of respect; what is more, as Father Thomas à Kempis so wisely tells us, we ourselves do not know when *we* shall fall, for we are all frail, all subject to sin, all susceptible to falling.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 13.12



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