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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 4

Prudence in Action

"DO NOT yield to every impulse and suggestion but consider things carefully and patiently in the light of God's will. For very often, sad to say, we are so weak that we believe and speak evil of others rather than good. Perfect men, however, do not readily believe every talebearer, because they know that human frailty is prone to evil and is likely to appear in speech.

Not to act rashly or to cling obstinately to one's opinion, not to believe everything people say or to spread abroad the gossip one has heard, is great wisdom.

Take counsel with a wise and conscientious man. Seek the advice of your betters in preference to following your own inclinations.

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."

Sister's Commentary:

Do you realize that when you disclose the sin of another, you become guilty of that sin ... and more, for you add to it the sin of slander and gossip! Whether publicly or privately (you know, "*I shouldn't tell you this, but ...*", "*Between you and me ...*", "*I am telling you this in secret ...*" --- sound familiar?) when you uncover, disclose, reveal the sin of another to *anyone under any circumstances* ... you make that sin your own. And with the sin the guilt. And with the guilt the just punishment (that in all likelihood you would happily see visited upon your neighbor who sinned first).

Read that again.

This chapter possesses great wisdom in few words. It reaffirms our need to pray over the human encounters that we have with others in our daily lives.

We have all seen the havoc, the damage, disaster and wreckage that a hurricane, a tsunami, or an earthquake can bring. Equally devastating and as broadly destructive can be the havoc and chaos wrought by the human tongue when it is not tethered by love and breaks loose of the Commandments of God. Like the tsunami, its effects extend far beyond what we could possibly anticipate. It is whispered in one ear ... and pours out of the mouths of thousands. Would that the Gospel were communicated so quickly, so broadly ... and so eagerly!

Saint James unsparingly warns us of the danger of the human tongue: and he does so in absolutely clear and unambiguous terms:

"The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is placed among our members, which defileth the whole body, and inflameth the wheel of our nativity, being set on fire by hell. For every nature of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of the rest, is tamed, and hath been tamed, by the nature of man: But the tongue no man can tame, an unquiet evil, full of deadly poison." ¹

Thomas A Kempis is doing likewise.

Human relationships (which are always delicate), families, and even entire communities can be so severely wounded if not utterly broken and scattered, by the malicious activity of the tongue which lends itself so easily to the evil of gossip and tale bearing.

We have such a tremendous personal responsibility in our conversations and verbal exchanges -- and few of us take thought of it. The words leave our mouths and as quickly as they pass, so does our *responsibility* for anything that ensues as a result of them --- or so we mistakenly think. They are, after all, "just words", uttered in mere seconds --- and kept in the same confidence in which you had kept it ... which is to say, none! But you cannot call them back! As Confucius wisely observed, "One cannot unsay what one has said."

Be the floodgate against that tide of poison! Let it stop with you and go no further! Your "confidential friend" does not live in isolation, and neither do you. If she has spoken ill of another, betrayed the trust of another, revealed the sin of another, she will speak ill of you, as easily betray you, and reveal your own sins and indiscretions as readily as she revealed the sins of others to you --- and with the same false promise with which she first disclosed it to you. In many ways, by their tongues you will know your friends.

Needless to say, in our own conversations many of us are guilty of proffering "tidbits" of lethal information that can easily assassinate the character of another. How reluctant, how slow we are to cloak the actions of others in charity rather than exposing them to shame!

We must recognize and be aware of this sinfulness within us that wittingly or not lures others, subtly encourages others, to also propagate sin through gossip. This much needed awareness should make us, at such times of temptation, to choose to die to our selves and our own wills and desires and to choose what we know God would have of us. No sin, we soon come to find, is entirely personal after all; it always affects, and most often poisons, others.

What, then, are we to do in the problematic situation where, in some way or another, we become involved in an encounter fraught with moral or spiritual danger to another? Are we to say nothing? Do nothing? Let evil pass?

It is a false concept of charity if we see a person in moral danger, from sex, drugs, drink and make "charitable excuses" for them, which not only pander to their sins but perpetuate them because we do not have the courage of the conviction to help them. We have a duty to protect and nurture life. It is a three-fold duty: to God Who created them and loves them, to they themselves who either fail to apprehend the good or have not the strength to seize it, and to ourselves upon whom it is incumbent to be "our brother's keeper."

But, in such a given situation, first we must first carefully examine our own motivations and intentions with great honesty, being certain of facts (not our imaginings!) and speaking directly -- and discreetly --- to those involved. Christ Himself tells us very clearly, "*If thy brother shall offend against thee, go, and rebuke him between thee and him alone.*"²

Some situations may be more difficult and delicate. Thomas gives such wise advice here: seek counsel from those in a position to do so, a priest, someone anointed to care and guide souls. What the Priest may say may or may not be pleasing to you, but obey his directives, and God who sees your obedience and desire for good will bring some greater good out of the situation than any counsel that you alone can impart.

Saint Francis de Sales speaks of this eloquently and at greater length in his renowned spiritual work, "**An Introduction to the Devout Life**" which should be, together with the "**Imitation of Christ**" and "**Abandonment to Divine Providence**" by Father Jean-Pierre de Caussade (*with the translation by John Beevers*), on the reading list of every Catholic. It is wonderful and profitable reading!

¹ Saint James 3.6-8

² Saint Matthew 18.15

*Your Little Sisters in Christ
with our co-worker, Joseph Mary*



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