

233
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The Imitation of Mary

BY
THOMAS à KEMPIS

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Extracts from the Original Works of
THOMAS à KEMPIS

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The Imitation of Christ, the most beautiful of books coming from the hand of man, ought to have as a counterpart *The Imitation of Mary*. However, we do not have it in a completely finished form; we only possess it scattered throughout the works of Thomas à Kempis.

The century which brought forth *The Imitation of Christ*—the fifteenth—is the century which saw completed the greater part of the Gothic churches dedicated to the Virgin in France and the Low Countries, from Notre Dame of Paris to the Cathedral of Cologne.

This is the most flourishing epoch of the cult of the Virgin, the golden age of devotion to Mary. The name of Mary is found ever at the side of that of Jesus, as, for example, on the standard of Jeanne d'Arc.

Besides, we notice with sorrow that the author of *The Imitation of Christ* does not speak a single time of devotion to the Virgin Mary in this divine book which treats of all the subjects of Christian Mysticism.

Was it forgetfulness or negligence? Neither one nor the other. Thomas à Kempis, canon of Cologne, and abbé of Mount St. Agnes whose church is dedicated to the Virgin, has written entire chapters on devotion to Mary in his divers works.

But the copyists who transcribed the first Books of *The Imitation*, finished by Kempis, thus leaving the fourth incomplete, did not know how to arrange the passages treating of the devotion to the Virgin Mary in the immense production of the author.

The present work, which is only the work of an analyst, we have undertaken. We have been able to extract from the different works of Kempis whole chapters on the devotion to Mary written in the same poetic and rhythmic language as is *The Imitation*. Everything seems to indicate that they were destined to form a Fifth Book of the Treatise on the Interior Life, following that of the Eucharist. One finds in it the same doctrine of elevated theology and the same grace of poetry in its forms. . .

330

SOLILOQUIES OF THE SOUL

—*Thomas à Kempis*

Read, O my son, or rather chant while reading,

These sweet versicles in honor of Mary.

Take them as a viaticum for the soul;

Take them as one does a staff for a journey.

Read often, and re-read with devotion while praying.

May Jesus and Mary be for you in life,

At all times, in every place, your sole company,

For fear that you may wander alone or unguided,

Shedding without the perfumes from within.

You will find here a treatise on Mary, brief,

But a treatise full of sweetness for meditation,

And a treatise full of strength to protect you well.

Meditate on it often, and often pray, too,

Saying with a full heart: Hail, Mary.

III. Prayer:

O Mary, O sweet Mother of my Jesus, I beg you, deign to open to your poor servant both your maternal compassion and your love, laden with sweetness.

Pour into my heart one drop of your tenderness so that I may love you with a pure heart, you, O Mother, the sweetest of all mothers, so that I may imitate you and Jesus.

Listen to me, Mother, listen to me, Mary,
kneeling I salute you: Ave Maria.

The sky rejoices and the earth smiles
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

Satan flies afar and all hell shudders
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

The world seems small and the flesh trembles
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

Sadness flees and happiness reigns
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

Lukewarmness disappears and love reappears
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

Devotion grows and compunction is born
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

Hope gushes forth and consolation increases
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

The whole soul rekindles and love grows tender
when the heart says: Ave Maria.

So rich and so great is the sweetness of this prayer, that it could not be expressed in words.

Thus, again I kneel before you, O Mary, O Virgin, O Mother filled with goodness, and I say to you, over and over, with reverence and devotion:

Hail, Mary, Hail! Receive this pious salutation, and with it receive me, O Mother, within your bosom.

(Discourse XXV)

HOMILY

THE MODEL AND IMITATION

I. To imitate is to reproduce a model; but the model can be larger or smaller than the reproduction. Thus it is in the imitation of Jesus, of Mary and of the Saints. The models in this case are greater than nature. We can, nevertheless, succeed in resembling them by reproducing their life.

II. Life is a complexity of virtues and of faults, of forces and of instincts. Nothing is evil by nature, but according as one rises or falls, one becomes good or bad. It can be said that a middle way does not exist. One must choose vice or virtue. To practice virtue an effort must be made; such is the meaning of the Latin word: *virtus*. To follow vice it suffices to let oneself go; such is the meaning of the Latin word: *vitium*.

III. The Christian soul, in the face of the divine model, Mary, exalts itself to the practice of the virtues which it admires in her who is, at the same time, a sublime model and an admirable mistress, an example and a mother.

MEDITATION

THE WORK OF SANCTIFICATION

It is a science to know how to regard a model; it is an art to be able to reproduce it. This art and this work contain the whole secret of the spiritual life. Consideration is meditation or contemplation, the study of divine harmonies. We emulate the Saints, and in order to do so we must suffer. That is why grief teaches more than joy. He who has not suffered, what does he know? A heart which loves has already been half-opened by a sword. Strike the heart, for in it is genius, said the poet; and there also is sanctity.

Practice: To wear a medal of Mary, as beautiful as possible, is an easy means of recalling that to imitate her one must make an effort.

Thought: To one who loves Mary everything seems sweet and light. *Amara dulcia fiunt, gravia levia veniunt.*

HOMILY

THE TITLES AND FUNCTIONS OF MARY

I. Our duties toward Mary flow from the titles and functions of Mary herself. Her titles are the most beautiful and the most sweet: first, that of mother, which one says lovingly at any age; next, the title of model, which one considers with admiration and joy.

II. Her functions are in relation to her titles: the names given by God are at once an evocation and a creation of the qualities signified by the names and titles themselves. Thus Mary, in virtue of her titles, exercises her functions of mother who consoles, supports and nourishes, of advocate who counsels, directs and defends, and lastly of model who exalts and attracts.

III. In a prayer exultant with joy and full of love, the faithful beg Mary to teach them to pray as the angels pray. Prayer, here on earth, cries, weeps or is silent; prayer, in heaven, is a vision, a contemplation and an ecstasy.

MEDITATION

THE SUPERNATURAL LIFE

To live is to rise, it is to rise above the earth: see the flowers which live and those which are dead. Man loves to live so fully that he wishes to live a double life: hence arises love, which is the most beautiful thing on the earth.

This earthly existence is not, however, all of life. There is the life of the soul, without which love itself is nothing. Love which seems not to be immortal does not satisfy the heart. The life which does not die is the supernatural life, the life of grace.

Mary has been given to us for a model and for a mother in this new life added to the earthly life. He who has not known this desire to rise still higher, has not as yet lived. Let us live, then, not in order to die, but in order to attain immortality.

Practice: Reciting the Rosary, or simply carrying it, is a practice which aids the soul to rise to heavenly thoughts.

Thought: To live with Mary is to live in the security and the happiness of heaven.

Bene et secure ambulat qui Mariam in corde portat.

CHAPTER III

VIRTUES AND TASKS OF
A GOOD SERVANT OF MARY

I.

Do you always wish to do what is pleasing to Mary?

Be humble, patient, chaste, reserved in everything, full of mildness, an interior man, filled with zeal, little versed in exterior matters, recollected.

Read often, write often, but most often pray.

The service of Mary should seem to you neither long nor laborious, but on the contrary always delightful, always full of happiness, always eager.

To serve with your heart and mind such a mistress is always a work pious and useful for salvation.

The most lowly offerings are acceptable to her as equivalent to the most solemn, when they are proffered with love, with spontaneity, and with devotion.

She knows how little we are able to give, and she requires not the impossible from her children.

A merciful sovereign and queen of mildness, she is above all a mother. As a mother, she knows only how to compassionate with the little and the poor, she who has given to the world mercy in Jesus.

II.

Learn then to call upon Jesus in everything, and you will be aided both in perils of the soul and of the body.

Have Jesus always in your heart, in happiness, and you will never be overcome by human distress.

Say often the Hail Mary: you will find in it joy and peace: no prayer is more beautiful than the Our Father; none is sweeter and gentler than the Hail Mary.

Pray as the angel prayed before Mary: work as a faithful servant works, and you shall have in heaven your crown and place.

He who knows how to nourish his soul with prayer, he who knows how to pray with the sacred texts, will never know aridity in devotion. Strive thus constantly to honor the names of Jesus and Mary in your heart and with your lips.

III.

Wherever you may go, or wherever you may be, implore Jesus and call upon Mary.

Have as a rule of life and as a help in time of need this pious invocation: Guide, O my Lord, always guide my way in Thy presence.

He who in his heart bears Jesus and Mary always works well, always conducts himself well.

Sing these two names, sing them in your heart, sing them with your lips, sing them with your hands.

Let your looks seek them, let your eyes implore them, let your arms embrace them, let your knees adore them.

IV. Prayer:

O Mary, O Mother full of mercy, receive close to you, your servant wandering without consolation, in the midst of his trials. Look, O my Queen, look at my affliction and open to me your heart full of consolation.

Here I am praying and saying in my distress, that I shall not cease nor leave you until you have had pity on me.

I know, O Mother, your incomparable sweetness, I know the maternal flame of your noble heart, I know the fullness of love that fills it, and that I may have full hope in you.

Also, I take refuge with you, O my Mother, so that in joy as in sorrow, I may receive your watchful succor and listen to your maternal consolation.

(The Valley of Lilies, Chap. XIII)

HOMILY

THE VIRTUES THAT A GOOD SERVANT OF MARY OUGHT TO PRACTICE
AND THE OFFICES HE OUGHT TO FULFILL

I. The Latins have two words to designate the good actions to be accomplished in life. The word *virtus* in order to designate an action made with effort and good will, and the word *officium* in order to characterize an action accomplished as a duty but without attachment of the heart. That which is required here of a good servant of Mary are virtues, that is to say, meritorious acts, élans of the heart and not only works which domestics themselves can fulfill. There are firstly the interior virtues: humility, patience and purity.

II. Afterwards there are the exterior virtues or virtues of action: effort in work, elevation of the mind, union in mental prayer, zeal in vocal prayer.

III. These united virtues ought to animate all practices of devotion, if we wish that these practices be spiritual acts of meritorious virtue and not only material offices of remunerated work. Thus Mary acted; thus we ourselves should act.

IV. The servant therefore asks of Mary, who is a mother and a model, to aid him in this work and to console him amid the difficulties of the work.

MEDITATION

THE ACTIVE LIFE

Life is like fire: it only preserves itself while communicating itself. The ancients used to represent it by a flame and that is, indeed, the truth. To live it is necessary to act. The active life supposes will and effort. Mary has known and practiced this life, as all the Saints have practiced it.

Life which passes selfishly, disillusioned and engenders boredom; *taedium vitae*. Unfortunate is the soul which permits itself to live without rising! He will have lived most who will have acted most, through his heart, through his soul and through his body, through love, through the mind and through works.

Is there a more beautiful model than Mary, in the Temple, at Nazareth, on Calvary, with St. John? Such a one has lived long, who has lived little, said a wise man. Let us live like Mary and with Mary.

Practice: Do not allow a single day to pass without having made an effort in at least one small thing.

Thought: A lukewarm life is a dull one; live as Mary did.
Aspice Mariam, contemplare et mirare.

CHAPTER IV

GRANDEURS AND GLORIES OF MARY

I.

Who is she who rises from the emptiness of this world steeped in the delights of Paradise?

O Mary, greater than the heavens, you have the world under your feet, and you are seated close to God, on the throne of honor which Jesus gave you.

Your mercy which surpasses all mercy draws me to you, for you are ever the aid and consolation of those who suffer.

I have need, O Mother, of being consoled and fortified. More than that, I have need of the grace of your Son because I know that without it I can accomplish nothing.

You are able, O my Mother, if you wish, to lift me up and help me with your powerful succor. You can comfort me with your abundant consolation.

I feel myself engulfed by temptation, so I run to you, since I feel that near you I shall find help as well as pity.

II.

And if I may approach your majesty and greet you with reverence and honor, I feel that I must approach you with love.

There is no praise which I can offer you; rather, I am forced to present to you supplication.

He who wishes to come near you irreverently, will be founded: therefore I wish to come to you, O Mother, with confidence, with respect, with humility, so as to merit your clemency and your help.

Yes, it is with respect, with love and confidence that I come, O Mary, to offer you in my turn the salutation the angel offered you kneeling.

I offer it to you, arms extended and hands upraised, I offer it to you thousands and thousands of times and I beg every one to offer it for me, because I know of nothing sweeter that I may give.

III. Prayer:

O Mother, more beloved than all mothers, O Mary, if sometimes I have forgotten you, I regret and weep for it today. But you, oh! do not forget me, you who alone brought forth mercy by giving birth to Jesus.

Kneeling, I salute you, I bow before you, I join my hands and prostrate myself, so that you may listen with greater love to my prayer.

I say before you, and I wish ever to repeat it:

"Hail Mary, full of grace the Lord is with you; you are blessed among all women, and Jesus, the fruit of your womb, is blessed."

(Soliloquy of the Soul, Chap. XXIII)

HOMILY

THE EMINENT DIGNITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

I. The dignity of a person or of a being is measured by its function. There is not on earth, nor even in heaven, a function equal to that of the divine maternity of Mary. Mary is truly *Theotókos*, Mother of God and at the same time Mother of the Savior, because in Jesus the divinity and the humanity are substantially united. There is therefore no dignity superior to the dignity of Mary.

II. This eminent maternal dignity confers on Mary divine prerogatives at the same time that it infuses into her human tenderness superior to the most exquisite tenderness of mothers on earth. Even from the view point of the physical function, of the beauty of the woman and of the mother, Mary is above all those who have been outstanding in the world by their charms and attractions. St. Dennis, the Arcopagite, refined Athenian and disciple of St. Paul, having gone to Jerusalem and having seen Mary, found her so beautiful that he wished to prostrate himself before her as before a goddess. Thus should we do in spirit.

III. It is what the disciple promises enthusiastically in the prayer addressed to Mary.

MEDITATION

THE USE OF TIME

Between the past which escapes us and the future which does not belong to us, there is the present which alone we possess. This is the time of action and of duty. To employ the present well is to enrich your life; to waste it is to die with it.

The first rule to use time well, is to use it and not to lose it. Next, to use it in time and not to act at random. Finally, to use it profitably and not without goal and rule; put off nothing, delay nothing until later. This is the secret, par excellence, of success.

Mary, here again, can serve us as model. She was undoubtedly the valiant and diligent woman of whom the Gospel speaks. She fulfilled with perfection the motto of the noble Romans: *Domi mansit, lanam fecit*. Mary, indeed, was at once Israelite by birth and Roman by adoption. She is the perfect type of woman in the double sense of: *femina et mulier*. Let us reproduce this model and this type.

Practice: St. Francis of Sales purchased by an alms each hour which he thought to have lost or misused: imitate him.

Thought: The thought of Mary is a consolation and a protection: *Solamen et dictamen*.

CHAPTER V OUR DUTIES TO MARY

I.

You must still learn, my son, how to seek God as Mary did. You must lean upon her powerful help, and be ever doubtful of your own strength, for fear of being enmeshed here below in your passions.

Everyday you should rise above yourself with new thoughts, and tender your desires to heaven, toward the heaven in which you see Mary your Queen, near Jesus the King, and in the midst of the court of angels.

Alas! Often our weakness will force us to descend into this valley of tears!

It is then above all that it will be necessary to make an effort to raise the voice in frequent supplication to Mary, who is the mother of mercy, so that she may tell her merciful Son how our soul lacks the wine of fervor, how it has need of the perfume of piety in order to be able to praise Him as one should praise God.

Because He alone, in truth, hastens to succor those who in order to please Him have scorned the world, and those who are for His sake scorned by the world, because of His Name and His holy Gospel.

II.

It is often important, indeed, to know of a refuge in which one may hide oneself against storms, in the presence of tempests of tribulation.

There is no spot, no place more secure, no port more tranquil than the bosom of Mary.

So there is no runner more rapid to support us against the blows of the enemy, than an ardent prayer, rising from the plain to the well-armed stronghold of the Virgin Mary. This stronghold is the same one in which Jesus entered to be clothed therein with a body like unto an armor, so as to chase afar the prince of darkness.

Enter you, too, within that fortress so as to be sheltered from those who assail you.

Remain under the mantle of the Virgin Mary; you will be protected by the arms of a mother.

The prayer of Mary puts to flight the destructive rabble of evil enemies: her aid snatches us from imminent peril.

Near her, he who wavers finds support, and he who is abandoned, help.

It is a boon, a very great boon, for you, if you know how to show yourself worthy in this regard, and at the same time strive attentively to please the Virgin Mary in everything.

You will thus merit her graces here below, and His glory on high in the company of the saints.

Attach yourself to her, and do not leave her until she has granted you her blessing so as to lead you to heaven.

III. Prayer:

O Mary, O mistress filled with clemency, in the name of pure love and affection, I remain at your feet. Give to my heart, I beg you, an increase of confidence.

Fear pursues me and doubt gnaws at me; despair assails me in the midst of temptations: only one thing is still able to console me: it is that I have sought to be heard by you. O Mother, I entrust myself to your heart.

(Monastic Enchiridion, Chap. IV)

HOMILY

DUTY

I. Duty is a harsh word when it designates the obligation which binds a man to his post. It becomes a word full of sweetness when it is applied to the voluntary attentions which the heart suggests for a loved one. Our duties to Mary should be of this type. These duties, extremely pleasing, are those of a son to his mother, of a friend to his friend. The thought of heaven is a force, as the thought of love is an allurements. To raise one's thoughts is to raise oneself completely: *Altius cogita*.

II. It is in the life of the soul as in the present life; to think well is the beginning of doing well. To have great thoughts is to prepare for great actions. Mary's example in this case is more than a demonstration, it is an attraction and a help. Mary, says the Gospel, kept all these things in her heart. As Pascal said, great thoughts come from the heart; it is they that create the action. Too often has mysticism been reproached as being only a dream. The mysticism of the *Imitation* is an action, for it is perfection.

III. This action is arduous and often discouraging; besides, the soul begs Mary for confidence to be able to attain the goal of the spiritual life, which is heaven.

MEDITATION

THE BEAUTIES OF MARY

The dream of every soul would be to see Mary in her heavenly splendor: Dante had this dream and tried to translate it into his *Paradise*. He represents Mary to us under the symbol of an aureole of pure gold and he refers to her only by the names of flowers: "blooming rose", "lily full of whiteness", "perfumed stem", "fragrant tree", "singing lyre", "sparkling sapphire", "soaring flame", "arc which rises". He sees her only in the midst of flowers, surrounded by stars, crowned with splendors. She epitomizes for him all which is charming here below in the being of a young girl, a virgin. The grace which extends itself

in reflections, the beauty which radiates in magnificence, the love which gushes forth in transport.

Before this dazzlement the poet lowers his eyes and kneels with arms extended. So, it seems, we too should do in order to contemplate the beauties of Mary.

"Now raise thy view", St. Bernard then says to him, "unto the visage most resembling Christ: for, in her splendor only, shalt thou win the power to look on Him."

Mary, indeed, is beautiful, as all souls are beautiful by the reflection of Christ in them.

Practice: Imitate the saints who used to wear the shield and insignia of Mary, like the scapular and the rosary.

Thought: The remembrance of Mary is an aid and a support:
Adjuvat et subleuat.

CHAPTER VI

OF THE POWER AND ABILITIES OF MARY

I.

Mary is faithful in her promises and generous in her gifts to her pious servants.

She enjoys the veneration of angels, but yet she accepts the attentions of men.

She tenderly sheds tears with the unhappy;

she is compassionate with the sorrows of those who suffer;

she comes to give help in the struggles of those who are tempted;

she turns herself ever to those who pray to her.

All those who go with confidence and devotion to seek refuge with her and call upon her name find in her abundance and consolation.

A queen, she commands the angels in heaven and can send them to succor the needy.

In the same way, she has empire everywhere over the demons and can prevent them from harming her servants.

The demons dread the Queen of Heaven and her name alone suffices to disperse them.

They tremble before the awesome and holy name of Mary, before the name which causes joy to Christians, they no longer dare to show themselves before us or to try again their insidious assaults.

As soon as they hear this holy name resound, they tremble, they prostrate, they flee as before a burst of thunder from the sky.

And the more often this name is pronounced by us, the more it is invoked devotedly and piously, the more quickly the demons fly from us.

II.

It is for us a duty sacred above all, that of loving at every moment the holy name of Mary.

It ought to be for all the faithful, a cult; for Religious, a meditation;