

obtained by fellowship with Christ who alone can provide the grace we need: **“We have to abandon all we love for the one we love , for Jesus wants us to love him above all other things”** (VII) and:

“When you have Christ you are rich and have all you require” (I)

The core of the book highlights grace and humility, and the suffering that we must all inevitably face in life: **“ It is the humble man God protects and delivers, the humble he loves and comforts”** (II) and:

“In the cross is salvation, in the cross is life. There is no other way to life and real inward peace except the way of the cross” (XII)

Book 3 also looks at the inward joy that comes from fellowship with Christ but this time it is in the context of a conversation between Jesus and a devout disciple. Its great importance is to see the devout man’s humility, his recognition of his absolute nothingness before Christ, and the way he marvels at why God should love him - the attitude of mind this teaches us is of paramount importance:

“O my God, all my good is found in you .. I am nothing, have nothing, can do nothing” (III).

God, in turn, accepts this truth and asks for total humility and dependence on him:



“When grace is given you, you must realise how wretched you are without it” (VII) and **“Never imagine you are somebody because you have done something good. You are a sinner. Left to yourself you always tend to nothingness”** (IV)

Book 4 gives a wonderful theology on the greatness of the Eucharist: **“What am I that you offer me yourself?”** (II) but, crucially, is highly critical of those who fail to realise what it **truly** is:

“Many go off to various places to see relics of saints .. it is curiosity and novelty that takes men to see such things. But here in the sacrament you are wholly present, my God, and when you are received worthily there the rich harvest of eternal salvation is brought .. it is a sad thing that so many pay so little attention to this saving mystery” (I).

Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011

20. Thomas A Kempis - The Imitation of Christ



1. Is Thomas’ emphasis on the need to minimise contact with other people, in order to follow God wholeheartedly, a sign of an inauthentic and/ or extreme spirituality?
2. Do you agree with Thomas that, next to love, humility is the most important virtue required in order to live a genuinely spiritual life?
3. Should the Eucharist be at the centre of any spirituality?

What is the Background of Thomas A Kempis?

Thomas A Kempis (1380-1471) was part of a religious community known as ‘**The Brethren of the Common Life**’. This community of men, lay and clergy, had been created by Geert Groote, one of the leading figures in the religious movement of the late 14th century known as the ‘**Devotio Moderna**’, or the ‘Modern Way of Serving God’.



This movement strongly emphasised personal devotion and social action, especially in education. The ‘Brethren’ lived a semi-monastic lifestyle, but without any formal monastic Rule except the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience while they remained in the community. However, they were free to leave at any time if they so wished. They dedicated themselves to prayer and the copying of religious books. Later some of the community decided to become Canon Regulars of the Augustinian Order, including Thomas.

The Structure and Emphasis of the ‘Imitation of Christ’

The Book really consists of **four** books, probably originally published separately. It is a marvellous source of spiritual guidance and is one of the most widely read books in the world. It teaches how to develop a deep personal spirituality, and is both thoroughly scripturally based and utterly Christ-centred throughout.

However, it is critical of excessive learning and speculative theology, while it says little about Christian dogma, apart from its wonderful 4th book on the value of the Eucharist. In addition, a significant part of it is primarily aimed at a **monastic** community although, conversely, the overall impression is of a book aimed at any God-seeking **individual**.

Its range of subject matter is so diverse that the summary that follows necessarily omits many important topics that Thomas addressed.

Book 1 is aimed at the temptations to be faced in the first stages of the spiritual life, and primarily addresses a **monastic** community. It stresses the **separation** from society necessary in order to follow God

wholeheartedly, a separation from both the company of other people and from as much temptation as possible:

“As far as possible **avoid the company of men for it is of great hindrance to talk of worldly affairs**” (ch.X) and “**You should want only God and his angel to know you well, and you should shun the company of men**” (VIII) and “**As long as we are in the world we shall have to face temptation .. there is no-one so holy that he never meets temptation**” (XIII)



Thomas says that we should not flee temptation. We must face it with patience and humility, know its root cause, and not allow it to fester:

“**The starting point for all evil temptings lies in inconstancy of mind and small confidence in God .. it is easier to defeat the enemy if we do not allow him to set foot inside the door of the mind but meet him on the step as he knocks**” (XIII)

One aspect of spirituality that occurs **again and again** in the wider book is **humility**. Thomas stresses the over-riding importance of true humility for a genuine spiritual life, and frequently contrasts it with what he perceives as the **over-rated** value of scholarship and learning:

“**Learned arguments do not make a man holy and righteous .. If you knew the whole Bible off by heart and all the expositions of scholars, what good would it do you without the love and grace of God?**” (I) and: “**What is the good of knowledge without fear of God. A humble ignorant man who serves God is better than a proud scholar**” and “**The highest and most profitable study is to understand one’s inmost nature and despise it**” (II)

Thomas also emphasises the importance of reading the scriptures, on avoiding hasty judgements, on bearing with the failings of others and, most importantly, of doing good works from **genuine** love:

“**A good deed done without love goes for nothing .. the man who has true love does not seek his own advantage**” (XV)

Book 2 addresses the inner life, and stresses that peace is only