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The Imitation of Christ

by **Father Thomas à Kempis**
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(1380 - 1471)

A STUDY

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

Part II of the Commentary on the Third Chapter: The Doctrine of Truth

Sister's Commentary:

"What, therefore, have we to do with questions of philosophy? He to whom the Eternal Word speaks is free from theorizing. For from this Word are all things and of Him all things speak -- the Beginning Who also speaks to us. Without this Word no man understands or judges aright. He to whom it becomes everything, who traces all things to it and who sees all things in it, may ease his heart and remain at peace with God.

O God, You Who are the truth, make me one with You in love everlasting. I am often wearied by the many things I hear and read, but in You is all that I long for. Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me.

The more recollected a man is, and the more simple of heart he becomes, the easier he understands sublime things, for he receives the light of knowledge from above. The pure, simple, and steadfast spirit is not distracted by many labours, for he does them all for the honour of God. And since he enjoys interior peace he seeks no selfish end in anything. What, indeed, gives more trouble and affliction than uncontrolled desires of the heart?"

Teaching is, or should be, the acceptance of a God-given charisma. It is a vocation from God given for the common good and the up building of others.

The writer of the Imitation is not saying that learning is to be despised! No! Rather, it is to be channeled and used for the good of others. Only when misused, when knowledge is sought purely for self indulgence or self-promotion, does it fall outside the province of Grace.

In an interesting note, St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest philosophers and thinkers, one of the brightest men of all time --- whose writings fill vast volumes --- upon a mystical experience of Jesus Christ, returned from his cell saying that "all that I have written is as so much straw" before the immediate encounter with God Himself. His learning, his great treatises, his knowledge ... was "as nothing" before the unspeakable reality of God.

Is knowledge, then, to be despised? Not at all. But it must be placed in proper perspective.

"Knowledge" is inseparable from "the Good" --- although not all knowledge is good.

Quite a paradox, yes? What we mean by this is that our familiarity, our acquaintance with, everything that is good, necessarily implies our knowledge of it --- that is to say, our knowledge of the good which we apprehend, and our apprehension of the good which we can then say that we know. How can we be said to possess the good that is, say, modesty, without knowing what modesty is? If we cannot distinguish between modesty and immodesty, how can we be said to **know** either --- which is **knowing** the difference, and making a distinction between which is **good** and which is not good?

Not only is this the knowledge of what is good, but it is "good knowledge". Remember, we said that not all knowledge is good. To know what is holy, good and pleasing to God is why you are reading this very article, Little One, yes? Learning of such things and coming to know them is to our everlasting good, and we never regret what we have learned, what we have come to know. Indeed, much of it is necessary to us for our eternal salvation. We must "know" what is pleasing to God and what it is that He wills for us. And this is always, always beneficial to us, in this life, and in the life to come. No possible harm, no evil whatever, can come from this knowledge. In this sense, it is "good knowledge". It benefits us. It is necessary to us.

But not so "all knowledge". This was, after all, the blandishment from the evil one who led our First Parents, Adam and Eve, to the Original, or first, Sin.

"And he commanded him, saying: Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death." ¹

"Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth which the Lord God made. And he said to the woman: Why hath

*God commanded you, that you should not eat of every tree of paradise? And the woman answered him, saying: Of the fruit of the trees that are in paradise we do eat: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise, God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die. And the serpent said to the woman: No, you shall not die the death. For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil."*²

As Adam and Eve tragically discovered, through an act of disobedience, not "all knowledge" is good. Consider the narrative a moment: Adam and Eve chose to know good **AND EVIL**. How can they have "known" evil without "experiencing" evil? Can we "know" the color purple without **experiencing** it? I cannot, for I am color blind. I have never seen purple. However much you "describe" it to me, I can never "experience" it. Only upon "experiencing" the color purple will I "know" it. The same can be said of anything whatever. This is a benign example. Let us look at it more deeply. How am I to "know" "pain" or "suffering" unless I "experience" it? Describe it to me as you will, if I had never known either, I would have no understanding --- no "knowledge" --- of what you were talking about. Only in experiencing it in my mind, my soul, my body, would I understand the words that you were using, and could be said to "know" that of which you speak.

This is too important to pass by lightly. We cannot stress this enough! Do you think "all knowledge" beneficial? Is "to know" the highest good? In our world of inflated "intellectuals", we would answer, "yes".

But that is because knowledge is not Wisdom, although we often confuse the two. Tell me ... how will you benefit from "knowing" --- through "experiencing" --- the stench of rotting flesh? Is this not "knowledge"? What of coming to experience and really "know" the procedure of an abortion --- seeing, witnessing helplessly, the violent struggle of a child in its mother's womb as it is systematically dismembered by a "physician"? This would be acquiring knowledge, yes? But like Adam and Eve we discover the reality to be quite different: we would that we had never experienced either. Such "knowledge, far from benefiting us, haunts us, fills us with either horror or revulsion, plagues our dreams and dogs our lives. How we would that we had never "experienced" and come to "know" either! This type of "bad knowledge", as it were, is the evil result of so much: the distortion of the beauty of human sexuality through pornography whose degrading images are burned in passion into the minds and memories of our children, the teaching and promotion in our schools of homosexuality as "a legitimate and alternative life style" to the youngest students however it robs them of their innocence, the addiction of our children to drugs in order to "know" narcotic states of mind.

Clearly, "knowledge" is not, as the great Fathers of the Church put it, the "*summum bonum*", the "highest good." Each of us in some way, indeed, in many ways, can attest to this.

Especially in light of St. Thomas Aquinas's own experience noted above, it is more than a merely interesting point of observation --- and a beautiful indication of God's justice --- that, through the ages, many, many simple hearts have ultimately arrived at the same understanding and grasp of truth as those who have studied books and had the advantages of learning. These simple hearts, unable through any fault of their own, perhaps through the lack of opportunities or aptitude, have in fact received infused knowledge, that utterly clear and absolutely intuitive knowledge, (apart from any study) that is a gift of the Holy Ghost. If it is Gods truth we are seeking, all will arrive at the same end, for Gods message and truth are the same for all.

This is not to say that we are free from reading, studying, and learning from the WORD of God surely and Divinely revealed in Sacred Scripture --- the Holy Bible --- to the contrary, we must be immersed in its guidance, instruction, correction and challenge, for it is, under the guidance of the Church, the Bride of Christ, the sure path to holiness, and thus to happiness and fulfillment.

Taken from the above text, let us together utter this beautiful prayer.

"O God, You Who are the truth, make me one with You in love everlasting. I am often wearied by the many things I hear and read, but in You is all that I long for. Let the learned be still, let all creatures be silent before You; You alone speak to me."

Simplicity of heart enables us to focus on "*the one thing necessary*", as Mary, the sister of Martha had chosen wisely. ³ May it please God to make us this wise ... as well as "*innocent as doves*" ⁴

¹ Genesis 2.16- 17

² Genesis 3.1-5

³ Saint Luke 10.42

⁴ St. Matthew 10.16

Your Little Sisters in Christ

