



# 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 5

### READING THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

"**TRUTH**, not eloquence, is to be sought in reading the Holy Scriptures; and every part must be read in the spirit in which it was written. For in the Scriptures we ought to seek profit rather than polished diction.

Likewise we ought to read simple and devout books as willingly as learned and profound ones. We ought not to be swayed by the authority of the writer, whether he be a great literary light or an insignificant person, but by the love of simple truth. We ought not to ask who is speaking, but mark what is said. Men pass away, but the truth of the Lord remains forever. God speaks to us in many ways without regard for persons.

Our curiosity often impedes our reading of the Scriptures, when we wish to understand and mull over what we ought simply to read and pass by.

If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the sayings of the ancients, for they were not made without purpose."

## *Sister's Commentary:*

It is undoubtedly true that translations of the Bible vary, and that not all equally attract us. Each translation, however, has something to offer to someone. What one translation offers poetically, another may offer in the way of clarity. Words written in one edition we may fail to grasp, where in another it may be far clearer to us. Perhaps in light of this multiplicity of translations, or even the footnotes accompanying the same translation, we can easily find ourselves distracted from the very text to which we apply ourselves. There is great danger when we are pulled aside from an otherwise clear message by allowing ourselves to be distracted by non-essentials and falling into unprofitable disagreements and arguments about words particular to one translation that are not of themselves important, except inasmuch as we use them as the opportunity to display our “learnedness”. Thomas is very clear that what we should seek in our reading is spiritual profit, not the vain veneer of literary erudition.

We can miss the message, miss the touch of the Holy Ghost, entirely by becoming involved in vain and petty quarrels over words, as though by substituting a single brick we can change the entire edifice. What matters is what God is saying to us --- and our response to it!

The Imitation also invites us to appreciate, to explore, and to acquire some familiarity with the great writings of the Church Fathers, her Saints, and her spiritual writers in our seeking the “Pearl of Great Price”, the truth of Jesus Christ within them.

Thomas also warns us against the crippling mentality of being quick to follow certain literary writers who have become contemporary names and celebrities. This is vanity, in both senses of the word. Such people often endeavor to obtain and read their material, not so much for its content or inherent value (if indeed it has more than passing value), but because in doing so they endeavor to impress others with their having read “so and so” who is popular for the moment, often despite the insipid or trite nature of his work that lends itself to the imagination of many and the edification of none.

We must have the humility to recognize our literary limitations --- and we all have them --- and to exercise both discretion and self-discipline in our spiritual reading. We cannot, and in very deed should not, attempt to read everything indiscriminately advertised and promoted. Authors and publishing houses are very adept at piquing our curiosity --- always for a profit ... their profit --- and at the expense of a promiscuous reader who cares little for sorting fact from fiction, and as a result falls into the most absurd beliefs. New Age literature is only one such venue, and it panders to whatever we wish it to be, regardless of the truth and most often at the cost of it. To read much is not to learn much.

Studying the Bible from an historical point of view can be very interesting and it can enhance our understanding and acquaintance with the culture and background of the time, but arguing about how many bricks of what size and composition were laid at the building of the temple, or why the River Jordan was three feet deep in one place and six in another, is quite beside the point. Indeed, numbingly so.

Many spiritual books could, in truth, be succinctly summarized on a single page. This is true. But it is not profitable. Extrapolate a point endlessly until it attains the minimum pagination of a book, and sell it. That may be “Good copy”, so to speak, but ultimately poor literature and of no value. Instead, determine to read Holy Scripture which is, after all, the source and inspiration of all genuine spiritual literature!

Holy Scripture is not simply, or even largely, “literature”; it is *life-giving*! It brings us Jesus Christ Who IS the Life, the Truth, and the Way. Any given passage is either a warning, a correction, a consolation, or a course of action exemplified for us.

It is not the amount we read but how we read and whether it leads to inner conversion and subsequent good choices. This is the ultimate in “good” reading. Little wonder that Holy Scripture, the Sacred Bible, remains the best-selling book on Earth for all time.

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



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