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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 6

UNBRIDLED AFFECTIONS

"**WHEN** a man desires a thing too much, he at once becomes ill at ease. A proud and avaricious man never rests, whereas he who is poor and humble of heart lives in a world of peace. An unmortified man is quickly tempted and overcome in small, trifling evils; his spirit is weak, in a measure carnal and inclined to sensual things; he can hardly abstain from earthly desires. Hence it makes him sad to forego them; he is quick to anger if reproved. Yet if he satisfies his desires, remorse of conscience overwhelms him because he followed his passions and they did not lead to the peace he sought.

True peace of heart, then, is found in resisting passions, not in satisfying them. There is no peace in the carnal man, in the man given to vain attractions, but there is peace in the fervent and spiritual man."

Sister's Commentary:

Desire. Think of it. What essentially is desire? Before we look at this more closely, we would do well to bear in mind the counsel of Holy Mother the Church who always admonishes us to avoid “the occasions of sin”. What does she mean?

She is telling us to avoid "the people, the places, or the things which lead us into sin", which is to say, those things before which we know we are weak and prone to sin. In her holy wisdom, Mother Church teaches us to know ourselves, invites us to clearly and candidly assess our weaknesses, for only in recognizing them and acknowledging our weakness before these occasions of sin, can we begin to prepare ourselves to lead holy lives, which is nothing less than lives free from sin.

We gravitate toward what we desire; our desire motivates us to precisely the people, places and things in which we had formerly found illicit enjoyment and through which we had subsequently sinned. We are like moths hovering in a centripetal circle around a dangerous flame, moving ever closer with each orbit, telling ourselves that we will not sin “this time” ... but we still desire something, something perversely vicarious through bringing ourselves in proximity to what we know, to what we had already learned is not good for us, still attracted by the fatal beauty and lurid warmth of the flame and fixated on its lithe and lissome dance, we circle imperceptibly closer. “Just a bit more”, we urge ourselves, even as we feel our resolve gradually diminishing, until the flame licks our wings and seduces us into the sultry magma of our own passion. And we sin. Again. We thought ourselves strong enough to resist what had seduced us into sin again and again, trusting to our own strength instead of the Wisdom of God and the wise counsel of our Holy Mother the Church who tells us that even with the gift of Actual Grace we stand in peril before the occasion of sin that has trapped us again and again. Better to flee the fire than test your strength against it. It will wither every time. But you do not have wisdom yet, and in your insolence you think yourself stronger than others, and wiser ... You are a fool.

So what are we to say about the nature of desire, apart from the danger posed by the occasion of sin? Essentially, desire is a longing for what we do not possess, or if we do legitimately possess it, it is the absence of the fulfillment, and the accompanying anticipation of it. A man may desire his wife, or a wife her husband, and anticipating fulfillment, longs for it. There is no sin in this. Desire itself, then, is not evil, and consequently is not intrinsically sinful. It is ***disordered*** desire that is sinful; the desire for that which is not legitimately ours, but belongs to another. It is theft awaiting the opportunity ... the occasion. It is the illegitimate possession of something or someone that belongs to another. This is *disordered desire*; it is desire not ordered toward an authentic and enduring good --- but brings evil out of another’s legitimate good, and as such is a perversion of the good. It is an act of debasing what is intrinsically noble, of vitiating what was created good, to evil and selfish ends. And all selfish ends are evil.

Disordered desire is ever restless, ever seeking satisfaction, gratification, satiation. No sooner is the desire fulfilled than another evil desire arises to replace it and when that, in turn, is fulfilled, the former desire is replenished and awakens. It is unremitting restlessness ordered only to the satisfaction of the self which, in justice, remains perpetually unsatisfied.

Father Thomas succinctly reminds us of this. Hence, he tells us that peace is found not in gratifying the incessant and ultimately insatiable promptings of the passions, but in resisting them --- as one who has acquired wisdom and knowing the evil to inevitably ensue, assiduously avoids it, taking refuge in God instead Who alone can fulfill the deepest longings of the heart.

Hence the wise man is humble, for he knows that there is little of virtue in him, and even less of strength ... and nothing of holiness. In this humility man turns toward God. With the holy Apostle Peter, we should ever say, again and again, "*Lord ... to Whom else can we go?*" for nothing in this world can satisfy the longing in my soul. Only Thee, Lord. Only Thee."

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



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