

Thomas à Kempis **(c. 1379-1471)**

Thomas à Kempis was a member of the Brethren of the Common Life, a religious community in Holland devoted to education and the care of the poor. Well educated himself, he spent his life as a copyist of manuscripts both sacred and secular, and as a spiritual director to young men wanting to join his order, a branch of the Augustinians.

His book, *The Imitation of Christ*, first published in 1441, has become a classic devotional work with multi-century impact like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The *Imitation* has been called the perfect expression of a spiritual movement known as *devotio moderna* (modern devotion), which swept Roman Catholicism through the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. It stressed meditation and the inner life and cautioned against the outer life of much busyness and occupation.

In the selection that follows, Kempis develops the importance of solitude and silence for one who would follow Jesus. He consistently counterpoints life outside the monastery with life inside, much to the advantage of the latter.

For those outside the monastery who cannot fully adopt a monastic style of life, Kempis's ideas are nevertheless useful. From time to time we can place ourselves in the cloister in a spiritual way, to gain the benefits of the monk's singleness of heart.

As you read the following selection, which is Book One, Chapter 20, imagine that you are a resident of a fifteenth-century monastery or convent. Each person there has a private room (cell or cubicle) that has in it a cot, a kneeler, possibly even a chair. The room may have a door or curtain. The rest of the religious house included rooms used in common: chapel, dining hall, library, and kitchen. Monasteries and convents today are similarly arranged, but usually with less austere furnishings and more relaxed rules for daily living.

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Solitude and Silence

Plan to take some time off, and give some thought as to what you'd do with that time; hopefully, you'll spend part of it reviewing God's favors to you in the past. What else? Lock up ye olde curiosity shop. Devote more time to reading your spiritual books than your survival manuals. Withdraw from casual conversations and leisurely pursuits. Don't contract for new ventures, and don't gossip about old ones. All these having been done, you'll find more than enough time to undertake a program of meditation. Most of the Saints did just that, avoided collaborative projects whenever they could, choosing instead to spend some private time with God.

Leave the crowd behind

Seneca, that old pagan philosopher and playwright, had it right so many centuries ago. When he went out with the intelligentsia or hung about with the entertainment crowd, he returned home utterly talked out and terribly hoarse, or so he said in one of his letters (Letter 7). Quite often we have the same experience when we horse around with our friends and associates for hours, even days, on end.

What's the remedy for a talkathon? It's easier to cut out the conversation altogether than it is to cut it down. What's the wisdom? It's easier to stay at home alone than to stroll the rialto with a bodyguard. What's certain? The person who wants to arrive at interiority and spirituality has to leave the crowd behind and spend some time with Jesus.

Nobody's comfortable in public unless he's spent a good deal of time in the quiet of his home. Nobody speaks with assurance who hasn't learned to hold his tongue. Nobody's a success as general who hasn't already survived as a soldier. Nobody respects decrees who hasn't already obeyed writs.

Feeling anything but secure

If a person wants to feel secure, then he has to have a good conscience. That's how the Saints did it. Virtue and grace shone from their very faces, but the fear of God ran in their very veins; even then they were subject to fits of spiritual anxiety and secular stress.

As for the depraved, what security they do feel in their being rises from a swamp of pride and presumption resolving itself into a pool of despond.

What's the moral? On the outside you may appear modest as a monk or holy as a hermit; but on the inside, at least while you're on this earth, you're seething and insecure.

Temptation helps

More often than they might suspect, people of reputation have been in grave danger and didn't know it; they're good people, but they've extended their self confidence beyond its natural limit. From this one could draw the conclusion that it's helpful to be tempted from time to time. One might even say that to be tempted to the point of endurance could help deflate interior desolations and deflect exterior consolations.

Who doesn't seek transitory joy? Who doesn't occupy himself with the world! We all do, but the one who has a good conscience, severs all tentacles to attachment, and meditates on divine and salutary things, he's the one who places his whole hope in God. He's the one who sails his boats on a sea of calm.

Sorrow helps

No one can ascend to heavenly consolation. That's because there's no sure stair. One solid step, though, is our heart's true sorrow. And where else can this sorrow be found but in one's cubicle; there you can shut out the hubbub of the world. "In your cubicles, work out your sorrowful contrition," says the psalmist (4.4). More often than not, you'll find in your cell what you lost in the streets.

A cell that's much prayed in is a pleasant spot. A cell that's rarely prayed in is a forbidding place. In the first blush of your conversion, you did what you were supposed to do, cultivate the solitude of your cell, and guard against the invasions of your quietude. Now you find it comfortable, welcoming, like an old dog or an old shoe.

Silence and quiet

In quiet and silence the faithful soul makes progress, the hidden meanings of the Scriptures become clear, and the eyes weep with devotion every night. Even as one learns to grow still, he draws closer to the Creator and farther from the hurly-burly of the world. As one divests himself of friends and acquaintances, he is visited by God and his holy angels.

Two courses of action. Better, to lie still in one's cubicle and worry about one's spiritual welfare. Worse, to roam the streets a wonderworker for others to the neglect of one's own spiritual life. Laudable it is for the religious to go to market only rarely. Laudable too is that, even when the religious goes, he refrains from meeting the eyes of others; from his very mien they know that he lives in another world.

Sickness and sadness

Why do you want to go out and see what you really shouldn't need to see? "The world passes, as does its concupiscence," wrote the Evangelist John (2:17). Our sensual desires promise us a promenade, but deliver us only a dragoonade. A sprightly step in the forenoon turns into a draggled tail in the afternoon. All-nighters of roister-doistery lead only to mornings of huggermuggery; that is to say, of sickness and sadness. Need I speak it? Every carnal joy begins with a caress, but in the end curls up into a ball and dies. I ask the question again. What can you see outside the monastery walls that you can't see inside? Behold heaven and earth and all the elements; from these all things are made.

Peace and quiet

What can you see on the outside that will survive the sun? Perhaps you believe you can find satisfaction out there somewhere, but truth to tell, you still can't reach it. If you were to cram all the things of the world into one still life, no matter how large the canvas, you'd still be no better off.

"Raise your eyes to God in the highest," says the psalmist (122:1). Pray for your own sins and negligences. Forgive the vain things the vain people have done. Look to the precepts God gave you. "Shut the door behind you," wrote the Evangelist Matthew (6:6). Call Jesus, your beloved friend, to join you. Remain with him in your cell because you won't find such peace elsewhere.

As for the common wisdom, if you hadn't gone out, you wouldn't have heard the disturbing rumors; better for you to have stayed at home in blissful ignorance. From which it follows that you may delight in hearing the latest news on the strand, but you'll surely have to deal with the sense of dislocation that results.

BIBLE SELECTION
Ecclesiastes 1:1-14 (NRSV)

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north;
round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

All things are wearisome; more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?

It has already been, in the ages before us.

The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people
yet to come by those who come after them.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "In Christ alone ..."

(Exhale) "... my soul finds rest."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of overactivity affect me? Do the demands of phone notifications overload my day? Are my texts and emails (however welcome in one sense) stacking up? Are there blank spaces left on my calendar? How does Thomas à Kempis's concern about overinvolvement in the "outer life" apply to me?
2. In what realistic ways can I gain the benefits of solitude and silence?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: List two or three practical steps you can take to stop rushing around, spinning your wheels, and feeling overwhelmed from life pressures. (What about taking a day off from the news? Social media?) Don't try to reinvent the monastic life; but absorb into your heart and your thoughts the real wisdom of what Thomas à Kempis has to say.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

Please don't try to find this Thomas à Kempis selection in any of your standard editions of the Imitation. It is an original translation by William Griffin, a fellow writer who possesses an exceptional facility with both Latin and English. He's quite serious and sensible, and at the same time an extremely funny chap.

I mean, only Bill Griffin, an old friend of mine, would have the imagination (and the daring) to translate "Trahunt desideria sensualitatis ad spatiandum: sed cum hora transierit, quid nisi gravitatem conscientiae, et cordis dispersionem, reportas?" (Literally, "The desires of sensuality draw us to take a walk; but when the hour shall have passed, what do you have to report except a heaviness of conscience and a scattering of the heart?") as "Our sensual desires promise us a promenade, but deliver us only a dragonnade."

And then, I all but fell out of my chair when I came upon this line: "All-nighters of roister-doistery lead only to mornings of huggermuggery." Funny, but at the same time right to the point because such behavior does indeed produce only sickness and sadness. I love Mr. Griffin's translation, scholarly and urbane.

Now, the key point of this selection is to understand solitude as a primary discipline in the spiritual life. Kempis writes, "The person who wants to arrive at interiority and spirituality has to leave the crowd behind and spend some time with Jesus" But why, why are experiences of solitude so foundational to building a spiritual life? First and foremost because in times of solitude we take the world off our shoulders and suspend our need to manage and control everyone and everything. One person with great relief, said to me, "I hereby resign as CEO of the universe." Solitude, you see, gives us perspective about our place in God's great kingdom of love. For example, in our first experiences of solitude we will be astonished (and humbled) to realize that the world – even our family and neighbors and coworkers – are able to get along quite well without us. Solitude, you see, gives us the space to look carefully and prayerfully at all the hair-trigger responses we have for doing and saying exactly the opposite of how Jesus taught us to live. I am thinking of things like our spontaneous anger whenever others voice opinions different from ours, our instant fear whenever our position is threatened, our verbal manipulation aimed at getting others to think and do as we want. And once we see these hair-trigger responses to life's situations we can then prayerfully discover and enter into new, more Christlike responses. This, and much more, is the fruit of solitude.

Excerpts taken from *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, Editors. HarperCollins, 2000.)