
CONVERSATIONS



Woman At the Well (esp. John 4:13-14) by Crystal Close - Oil on canvas; 36"x48"; 2016¹

“To Converse”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to converse**” – **1. - 1340-1727** - † *intransitive*. To move about, have one's being, live, dwell *in (on, upon)* a place, *among (with)* people, etc. *Obsolete*.

And its interesting etymology: < **French** *converser* (12th cent. in *Littré*) to pass one's life, live, dwell in or with, in modern **French** also to exchange words with; = **Provençal** *conversar*, **Spanish** *conversar*, **Italian** and late **Latin** *conversare* < **Latin** *conversārī* lit. to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass

¹ See the website of the artist, Crystal Close: <https://crystalclose.com/home.html>.

one's life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with; middle voice of rare *conversāre* to turn to and fro, frequentative of *convertēre* to turn about.

A Nod to Pope Leo XIV

Our learned author and spiritual master, Thomas à Kempis was a Brother of the Common Life (a Canons regular) of the Augustinian tradition, the spiritual tradition from which our present Pope has come.

And concerning the term “**Canons regular**” Professor Andrew Boyd explains: “*Canons regular* are usually established as a cathedral chapter [of Priests], or occasionally at some other significant church, the idea being that they were originally diocesan clergy who wished to live together somewhat like monks, in community, with the classic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and to live according to a Rule - most commonly that of St. Augustine. Given that they were primarily clerics and not monks, despite similarities, they were considered the “active” pastoral communities, as opposed to the more “contemplative” monastic communities.”

An author and His Text

Once a week during this summer of 2025, the Faber Institute will engage in conversation with an author, Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471; i.e., Thomas Hamerken, born in the German village of Kempen near Dusseldorf) and a book attributed to him, *The Imitation of Christ*. We say “attributed” to him, because it is not known whether he collected the teachings, edited them, and then constructed the book or was the author of this book of exceptional influence on spiritual people ever since it was published (around 1420, though the oldest manuscript we have is of 1472). Whatever the case, Thomas was centrally involved in the production of and sharing of this book, who himself lived with great *devotion* (i.e., acting from reverence and awe) the wisdom for which this book is justifiably praised.

The *Imitation of Christ* has undoubtedly proved the most influential devotional book in Western Christian history. ... It appeared in some 3,000 editions (50 of them prior to the year 1500).²

The Atmosphere of This Book

² John Van Engen, “[Introduction](#),” in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, ed. John Farina, trans. John Van Engen, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 8.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**atmosphere**” – 4.a. – 1797 – *figurative*. Surrounding mental or moral element, environment. Also, prevailing psychological climate; pervading tone or mood; characteristic mental or moral environment; fascinating or beguiling associations or effects.

Our choice to engage this book has as much to do with its profound insights into a practical, every-day way of living the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it does with its power to “shift” the inner “weather” of the reader.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote³ of this “hidden” or *kappa-element* in stories. A text’s *effects* in us are what we remember about a text long after we have forgotten its plot or arguments. Stories are most valuable for their *quality* or *atmosphere*, not simply for their plot. Michael Ward, one of the great living scholars of Lewis’ works wrote:

Coming to know God, for Lewis, is not like learning a *subject* but like *breathing a new atmosphere*, and it is of the highest significance that the word “atmosphere”, which is his preferred term for the *kappa-element* in romance,⁴ should also serve for his description of the nature of the Christian life.⁵

In our American moment, we notice in ourselves and others how often our “insides” are roiled, offended, unsettled, worried, fearful, unforgiving, angry, or defiant. We dwell in *stormy weather*. If a person regularly reads *The Imitation of Christ* – reading one chapter before going to sleep at night - it will change the “weather” of his or her soul. We need this change.

I am reminded of a similar effect caused in me during my middle school and high school years (1965-1972) when I was exposed to the “Desiderata”⁶, whose opening lines are:

³ C.S. Lewis, in a 1940 paper he wrote called, “The Kappa Element in Romance”, and which he gave at a literary society in Oxford.

⁴ “**romance**” meant as a literary form. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**romance**” – I.1. - A medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry. Also in extended use, with reference to narratives about important religious figures.

⁵ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (Oxford: 2008), p. 227.

⁶ A reflective text, sometimes referred to as a prose-poem, written by Max Ehrmann of Terre Haute, Indiana between 1921 and 1927. For a discussion of this famous text (in 1960s and 1970s America), see Wikipedia at “Desiderata”. For a copy of the text, see: <https://www.desiderata.com/desiderata.html>. This text showed up everywhere when I was a youth, especially on posters of all kinds that a thoughtful

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

One author writing in the mid-19th century (1849) about Thomas à Kempis noticed the “atmosphere” characteristic of his personality, portraying him in this way:

The character of his mind, in its original stamp, was evidently predisposed to a quiet, contemplative, introverted life. *There breathes in all his writings a peculiar spirit of satisfaction and repose, and there beats gently a pulse of inward joy, cheerfulness and delight.* We feel, as we read, that the writer moves only in this inner spiritual circle, but in this he is perfectly happy. The cell, narrow indeed, but cheered by the love of God and of Christ, is to him a *paradise*, which he would exchange only for Heaven. The duties of subjection, of prayer and other acts of devotion are to his taste the choicest delicacies. The renunciation of self, and devotedness to the interests of others, are the very elements of his life. Whatever he enjoins upon others, he himself performs with the greatest *pleasure and enthusiasm*.⁷ [Emphasis added.]

The Form of These Conversations

Each week during this summer of 2025, we will endeavor to publish on Wednesday mornings one of these *Conversations*.

We imagine each one consisting of three parts. In the first part, there is a painting capturing a moment in the Gospels when Jesus is engaged in conversation. Conversation was Jesus' primary work. In the second part, we print a copy of one chapter from *The Imitation of Christ*, taken from the most accurate translation of the text by Creasy. If the chapter is too long, we will select and print just a portion of that

teen wanted to hang on his or her bedroom wall. The text had an unexpectedly large impact among kids of my generation. We *all* liked the “Desiderata”.

⁷ B. Sears, [“Reformers before the Reformation,”](#) *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2.6 (1845): 226.

chapter. In the third part, we converse with that chapter, with some element or other in that chapter.

What We Encourage

Right up there with the Bible, *The Imitation of Christ* is one of the most printed books in human history. We encourage you to get yourselves a copy of it and to join us in reading a chapter each day, preferably just before you go to bed or to sleep. You have many options, but two editions that we recommend are:

- (1) The lovely edition translated from the original Latin by Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley and re-published by Ignatius Press in 2005. From the Foreword to the 1959 edition: “Monsignor Knox had for many years before his death made a practice of reading a daily chapter from *The Imitation of Christ*, and it was no matter for surprise that the hand which had given us a masterly new version of the Bible in English⁸ should stray towards that time-proved compendium of the spiritual life with which the years had made him increasingly familiar.”
- (2) The most current and accurate translation from Latin of *The Imitation of Christ* is by William Creasy, which in this edition is combined with a chapter-by-chapter commentary by the widely published spiritual writer, the Redemptorist, Dennis Billy, CSsR, published by Christian Classics in 2005. The commentary is an obvious strength of this book, as a study guide, but it is a drawback when it tempts a reader to pay less attention to Thomas’s original text or tempts a reader to “make a study” of this text rather than simply to read the text and to receive its wisdom as deeply within as he or she can, letting its “atmosphere” become pervasive within.

Welcome to the *Conversations* of this summer of 2025.

⁸ See the Knox Bible website: <https://www.knoxbible.com>. His translation of the entire Bible took him nine years to complete.